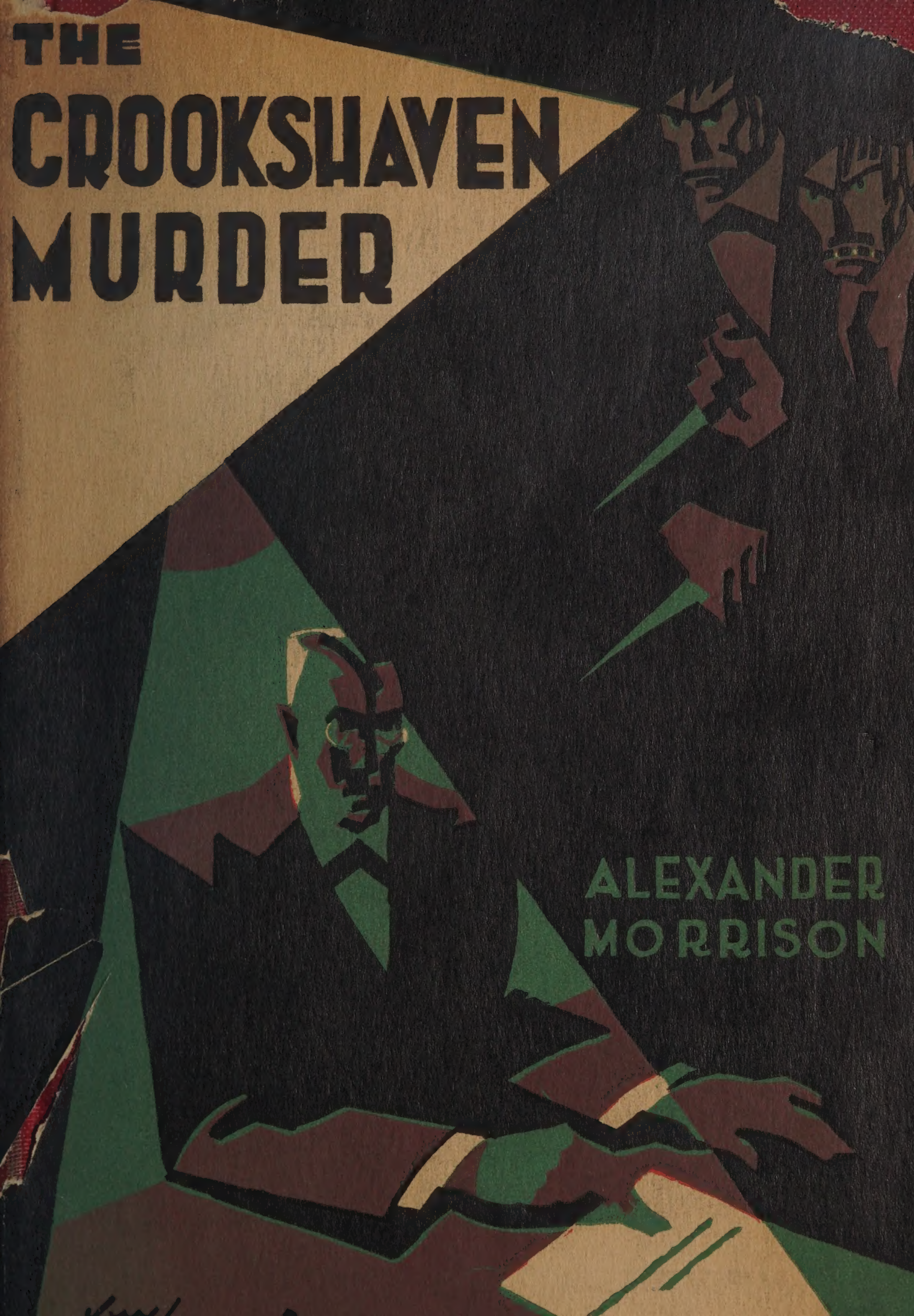

THE CROOKSHAVEN MURDER

ALEXANDER MORRISON

$2.00

THE CROOKSHAVEN MURDER

By Alexander Morrison

HERE is one of the most brilliant, baffling, and absorbing of recent mystery novels.

When Mrs. Bascom leaned over to shake her friend Gerard King by the shoulder, after the presentation of his amateur mystery play for the entertainment of the gay house party, she found that he had been murdered before their very eyes. Later, as the guests were questioned, few details could be learned about King's past, from which had been stretched an avenging arm. Yet the motive proved a vital part of the solution of the crime.

The unraveling of the mystery is complicated by a robbery, an escape from jail, personal retaliations, many suspicions, and a dash of romance, while the vivid writing and fine character-drawing no less than the complex and ingenious plot hold the reader's interest to the very end.

The CROOKSHAVEN MURDER

MORRISON

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The Crookshaven Murder

THE CROOKSHAVEN MURDER

BY

ALEXANDER MORRISON

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
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1927

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TO
MY MOTHER
WHO ONCE SAID THAT
ANY BOOK WITH SUCH A DEDICATION
MUST BE A GOOD ONE

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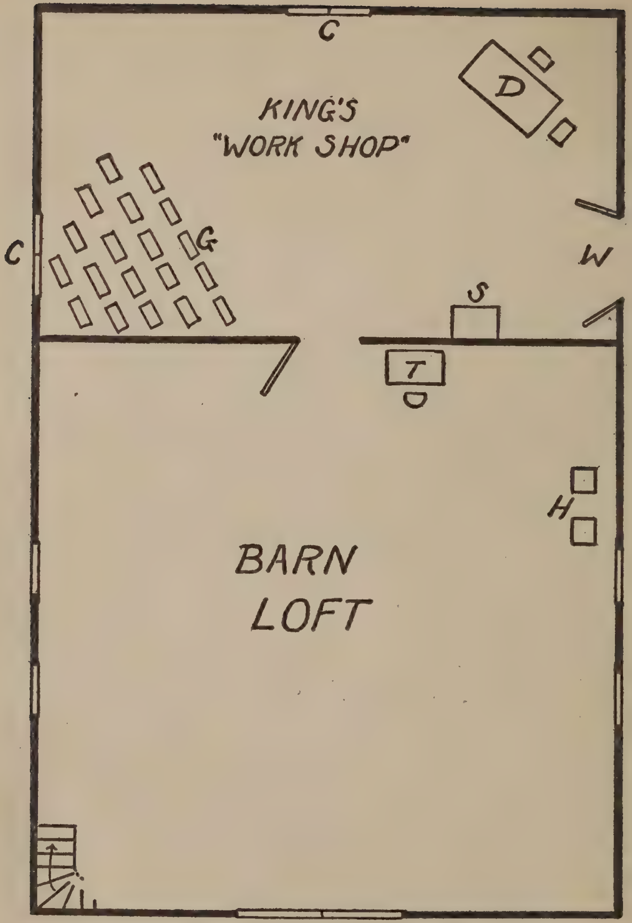

KEY.

D-Desk at which King sat. S-Safe.
W-Open window through which actors entered.
C-Curtained windows. G-Guests' chairs.
T-Typewriter desk. H-Old grain chutes.

THE CROOKSHAVEN MURDER

⁂

CHAPTER I

COMEDY

GERARD KING frowned at a folded slip of paper that lay on the floor at his side. It had fallen from his pocket when he pulled out a handkerchief. He stooped with an angry exclamation, retrieved and unfolded it, staring at some figures written across its face. His eyes slowly dilated; his ire changed to dread, as he peered about uneasily, glanced behind him into the shadows that encircled a desk light, the room's only illumination.

With an effort he shrugged, touched a lighted match to the paper and watched it burn, scowling to see his fingers tremble as he tossed the ashes into a tray.

'I'm a fool. A doddering old fool — afraid of his own shadow. Worse than one of the shrinking victims of blackmail in one of my own detective stories.'

His words were scornful, yet his rather gaunt face mirrored their literal sense rather than the bravado with which he had striven to utter them.

'This must be only some clumsy joke — a coincidence. — Yet some one sent that paper to me — has sent other, similar ones ——'

His jaw sagged open and his mutter ceased as something moved in the darkness before him, a ghostly figure that floated toward him. But as it approached into the light, it took form, became a young woman in a white chiffon gown that drifted about her in a restless cloud. King relaxed with a faint sigh, studying her vivacious, piquant face.

'Mr. King, what is it?' Her animation faded abruptly to alarm as she looked into his eyes. 'Something's worrying you. I've noticed that look on your face several times lately. What does it mean?'

The smile that had fled from her face seemed to leap across into his, wiping away its fear.

'Nonsense, my dear Miss Hawley. You've no right to impute such dire notions to an old man's reflections.'

'Old man — tosh,' she cut in indignantly. 'But I know you're worried. Tell me what it is — let me help you as you've so often helped me.'

'All right, Sylvia, forget your imaginative foolishness, and you can — by making my little amateur mystery play a success.'

'Oh, I'm primed to do my share, Mr. King — or Uncle, pro tem.' She smiled as she made this reference to her assigned rôle in the entertainment he had planned so carefully for the amusement of his week-end house-party. 'Yet I'm sure you are bluffing me about this. Somehow even I feel "all of a jump," as Mrs. Bascom would say — nervous, for no apparent reason. I wish you'd tell me ——'

'That must be stage fright, Sylvia. — It's almost time for my curtain speech of explanation to my guests, so I must hurry. Perhaps I'll tell you —

some other time. — Now, then, let's see. Paper-knife is ready; red ink, in the drawer. The stage is set for the murder scene, I guess, and the props all in order. I'll take one last look just to be sure.'

King disappeared into the darkness. A light flashed on with a click, and he strode over to a row of chairs placed at the farther end of the room. In one of these he seated himself and looked about swiftly.

It was a long room with walls of rough clapboards, ceiling of dusty rafters, and crude plank floor, covered by threadbare rugs. In reality it was a part of the hayloft of a barn, converted into a study, or 'workshop,' as he called it, where King spent a large part of his days writing detective stories that, started as a hobby, had superseded all other work.

Three French windows had been cut into the walls to give light and air. The one at the farther end of the room from him was uncurtained and slightly ajar; the other two — one on his left, one behind him — were covered with heavy portières which lapped over the casements, effectually excluding any light from outside. A desk, placed diagonally between the open window and the one on his left, together with two straight-backed chairs, completed the meager furnishings.

'Just switch off all the lights except on the desk, will you, Miss Hawley?' asked King from his seat. 'Great! You can't see a thing from here except the immediate area of the desk and a gray blur from the open window. Aside from these two spots, the room is pitch black. I couldn't have picked a better night for my play. It's so overcast, no light can seep in to reveal too many details.'

'It'll be the darkest murder of the year!' chuckled Sylvia.

'I hope so,' responded King. He tossed an old dressing-gown over the back of the desk chair, turned off the light, and led Sylvia away, discussing some final preparations still to be made.

A few minutes later, Sylvia returned to straighten up the desk and put a fresh blotter in the pad. Approaching almost noiselessly in the darkness, she hesitated just outside the door, thinking she had heard a board squeak under a footstep in the room. But when she called out — 'Who's there?' — a faint creak was her only answer, so she hurried in and switched on the light. The room was empty.

Sylvia was not a timid or imaginative woman normally, yet, as she changed the blotter, she looked up twice, unable to throw off the feeling that some one had been, or still was, in the room. Her task quickly completed, she did not stop to investigate further, plunging the room into darkness and hastening away, trying not to hear a sound from behind her that might have been a person breathing or moving lightly, stealthily.

When she reached the brightly lighted living-room of the house itself, Gerard King was ensconced before the fireplace, addressing his guests in a hearty voice.

'— And I doubt every last one of you. All this talk about the ease of solving a mystery once you find the clues is the theorizing of amateurs. Clues, so-called, may be twisted any number of ways. As a writer of detective fiction, I consider myself an authority on the matter and challenge your sleuthing powers.

'Now here's a practical test for you. We'll act out a play, a murder scene — let you watch and hear everything except who actually does the deed, then see who is clever enough to deduce the truth. I'll guarantee to provide sufficient tangible clues that, when rightly interpreted, will prove the murderer's guilt. As a spur, I'll give a prize to the one who actually proves — not merely guesses, mind you — who the guilty one is.'

A clamor of applause greeted his words, but he held up his hand for silence.

'Of course you must observe certain conditions. You must not interrupt the play nor move from your seats during it. You, Basil and Ruel, will play the villains, I'll be the victim. And we must have a heroine too. Miss Hawley shall do that rôle. — Now, then, after the play is over, I shall remain "dead" until my murderer has been discovered. You can do as you please then, make deductions and find clues — which you will discover in the room itself; but you must not touch or disturb anything that might prove vital evidence. That clear? — Then come along to my workshop. We'll make that the scene of the crime.'

When the guests trooped up the narrow, dark stairs to the loft, King, who refused to have any lights turned on, was in the lead. Beside him walked a slender, erect little woman who was speaking crisply.

'You can put it any way you please, Gerard King, but making a play and entertainment out of death is fool ——'

'Foolish? Of course, but what is any impromptu entertainment at a house-party if not foolish?'

'Impromptu?' she echoed with a shrewd sniff. 'It's all a hoax of yours — concocted well ahead of time, or I miss my guess. You brought it about entirely too cleverly for an impromptu stunt.'

'Right — as usual, Mrs. B., but I defy you to solve the mystery when you witness it, just the same!'

'Oh, you'll probably bungle it enough times to make that easy,' she gibed. 'You just watch me.'

They had no time for further conversation as King left his guests to fumble into their places in the darkness.

Mrs. Bascom picked out a prominent chair in the front row, tucked her feet neatly under it, and stoically endured being bumped and prodded rather than relinquish her seat. She had not thoroughly approved of this idea of acting out a murder — it seemed vaguely wrong, like tempting Providence; yet, since King intended to carry it through, Mrs. Bascom intended to miss no detail of it!

When the confusion and murmur of voices had somewhat abated, a light at the farther end of the room flashed on, and Mrs. Bascom leaned forward — though she would have stoutly denied any feeling of interest or excitement then. At his desk sat King, his dressing-gown loosely tied about his waist, revealing a paper sticking out of his vest pocket. By squinting, Mrs. Bascom made out the words printed on its outer fold — 'Last Will and Testament' — before he withdrew it to read its contents. He was smiling as he did this, but the expression changed abruptly to consternation, it seemed to Mrs. Bascom. He frowned, seized the sheet as if to tear it, then shrugged and obviously shook off this mood of surprise.

The incident passed so quickly that most of the guests accepted it as a bit of clever acting, but Mrs. Bascom checked off a point on her finger which she bent down to her palm. That was not all acting, she commented mentally. At the very outset, something had gone wrong, some mistake had been made and he was trying to conceal it. Nor was it an ordinary one to have called forth such an expression of surprise, almost of — well, dread, for lack of a better term, thought Mrs. Bascom. Yet evidently he had decided to overlook it and go on with the play. She wondered ——

Her speculations were interrupted by a low, scratching sound like pebbles thrown against glass. King half turned toward the French window that stood ajar, and called out gruffly, 'Come in.'

It flew open with a crash and Major, his ecstatic puppy, bounded into the room, only to stop short, bracing himself clumsily on all four paws at the burst of laughter from the guests behind Mrs. Bascom. His expressive tail drooped, one ear cocked up, and his head tipped quizzically. Then he hesitatingly sat up to beg, as if it were the only thing to do under the circumstances! A whispered pleading and insistent snapping of fingers from outside the window were hardly necessary to inform Mrs. Bascom that this actor, though effective, was usurping another's rôle. She bent a second finger with a chuckle, wondering if she would have hands enough for all the mistakes that seemed predestined to occur.

Reluctantly the dog dropped to his feet again and obeyed the summons from without, at which the expected actor made his anticlimactic entrance. It was Basil Stacey, wearing a long yellow slicker and carrying a slouch hat in his hand. His was a jolly, likable face, yet to Mrs. Bascom the concentrated light seemed to bring out the weakness of his jaw and lack of strong character.

'Beastly sort of a night to set a man on a cross-country hike,' he began at once as he advanced to the desk. 'Of all the toe-stubbing, shin-barking darkness I ever stumbled through ——'

'It was necessary,' interrupted King, overdoing the severity of his tone. 'No one knows you came or shall see you go, understand?'

A bark of remonstrance from outside smothered his answer.

The dialogue and acting that followed were decidedly unimpressive to Mrs. Bascom. Both men were upset, almost too overcome with mirth to carry out their rôles, much less make them effective. King demanded some undefined papers; Basil declined to give them up. An argument was clearly intended to follow, but Basil cut it short, unable to play his part longer. With a sound that he tried to pass off as a sob of emotion, he threw down a packet of papers on the desk, kicked aside the chair by which he had been standing, and stumbled toward the window. When he had passed out of the immediate area of the light so that his expression could no longer be seen, he paused to shake his fist menacingly, then disappeared into the darkness. But the point of the scene had been hopelessly spoiled.

Mrs. Bascom gave an audible 'Hump!' which she hoped would reach King's ears, then fixed her eyes on his face as he thumbed the papers in gloating silence before muttering, 'I must put them into the safe.' He crossed the room, passing before the dim oblong of light that defined the window, stooped down to fumble in the shadow beyond it, swung open the door to the safe she knew stood against the wall, and thrust in the papers.

Back again in his chair, he took up the will, drumming with his fingers as he read it.

A footstep sounded from the window, and another figure materialized, stepping inside and advancing slowly toward the desk.

'Well, back again? Changed your mind about letting me have 'em?' sneered King without turning his head.

'Pardon me, sir. May I have a word with you?'

'Oh, Ruel Moore. Well, I'm busy, but I'll listen if you make it brief. Need another loan, I suppose?'

King's greeting seemed to confuse Ruel. He stood stiffly by the side of the chair, and Mrs. Bascom relaxed as if in anticipation of another scene about to miscarry. Ruel, typical gentleman farmer in overalls and corduroy jacket, was too literal, too matter-of-fact for such fooling.

'No, Mr. King,' the latter answered as dramatically as he could. 'I've come to pay back what I've borrowed — with interest in full.'

King grunted, received the paper Ruel extended and glanced at it. 'The check is correct. — How did you do it? Some one die and leave you a fortune?'

'Pigs!' answered Ruel laconically. 'If you'll give me a receipt ——'.

He waited, manifestly ill at ease while the other scribbled on a paper. This he thrust into his pocket without a glance.

'Mr. King, there's another matter.'

'What, more pigs?'

'No, that is, you see, it's — it's not that — er — gender.'

'Oh, you mean sows — lady pigs?'

'Yes, the — er — ladies — your niece, to be exact.'

The guests behind Mrs. Bascom laughed, hissed and applauded this sally, but she suspected his embarrassment was due more to stage fright or diffidence than deliberate cleverness of acting. At their clamor, he stiffened, his jaw protruding with determination, his hesitancy vanishing.

'Young man, am I to assume you are proposing marriage to me?'

'Yes — that is, not to you, but to your niece. She's already accepted me and we intend ——'

'Intend, do you? — Let me get this straight. Ruel Moore, farmer, borrows money from Gerard King, feeds it to his hogs, and, through luck, gets it back again. He pays up his obligations, then announces his intentions of marrying his benefactor's wealthy niece, thereby clinching for himself — and his hogs — a future income. — And if she were penniless, what then?'

'Sylvia is, for all I know. Nothing would alter my intentions, for that matter.'

Some one near Mrs. Bascom interrupted *sotto voce*, 'You see, my dear, his intentions are honorable!' but King paid no attention to this remark, launching into a tirade against the pseudo-lover, the 'brawny hero all aquiver to carry off his romantic — and wealthy — heroine.' His anger was well simulated even though his bombastic words overdid the effect he tried to create. Ruel remained silent.

'Damn you, get out!' roared King in a final burst. 'My niece shall never marry a man with a piggery for a home. Sylvia shall marry when I choose and whom I choose, understand? — Now get out before I throw you out.'

'I go, sir, but I shall return.'

King sprang to his feet. 'If it is the last thing I do, it will be to prevent such a marriage. Let me find you so much as looking at Sylvia again, and I'll —— Wait. Though I've made a will here leaving everything I possess to her, before I sleep to-night I'll add a codicil cutting her off without a cent if she marries you. Then we shall see how pressing our swain becomes!'

'We shall see,' echoed Ruel as he stalked toward the window.

Mrs. Bascom led the applause heartily. In her estimation, Ruel had been a most natural actor after all, and her shrewd mind was already at work surmising which of these men would prove to be the murderer, as one was obviously cast for that rôle.

Meanwhile King scowled and sat down, muttering, 'The insolence of him. Sheer bravado —— Why, he — Sylvia ——'

'Yes, Uncle,' answered a voice from the neighborhood of the door. 'You want me?'

Mrs. Bascom recognized Sylvia Hawley's accent, watched the grace of her silhouette as it passed across the gray of the window and into the spot light of the desk.

'I do, Sylvia. Come here,' replied King sternly.

Even Mrs. Bascom was surprised at the transformation in King's secretary. Gone was her severe business dress and manner, the air of efficiency and briskness. She was animated, provocatively lovely.

'Something wrong, Uncle?'

'Decidedly so. — Ruel Moore has just been here.'

'To pay back his debt? I shouldn't think that would distress you.'

'You know what else transpired.'

'Perhaps I could guess. — But it was nothing "decidedly wrong," I'm sure.' Her averted eyes and hurried words attested to her skill as an actress.

'It was ridiculous — utterly impossible — preposterous!'

'Ridiculous? Not — not our love, Uncle.'

'Puppy love is always absurd.' The comparison was not a fortunate one, and King hurried on. 'As to this ——'

'This is not — what you just called it!'

'Words — quibbling. Listen to me, Sylvia. You shall not spoil your life by a hasty marriage to a common farmer. You are too fine for that. — No, let me finish. — When I brought you here to act as my secretary, I had no other thought than kindness toward an orphaned relative. But you have changed all that.

'Now you have become a daughter to me. Why, only to-day I made you heiress to my wealth. And as my niece — daughter, rather — you shall not throw yourself away for a whim, a romantic passion.

You have scarcely a nodding acquaintance with life, and there are others, real men, more worthy of ——'

'Social dummies, you mean! No, Uncle, I've seen that sort of successes — men birthmarked with a dollar sign who have never faced an issue in their lives. I've had to fight for a living, and I want a man who can do the same, one whom I can help. Ruel is that sort of man.'

'Nonsense — a yokel. I know the world better than you do. You leave such matters to me.'

'The world, yes — but not my love!'

'Look here, Sylvia, enough of this parrying. I forbid you to speak of that man again, absolutely forbid you to have anything to do with him, do you hear? I am your guardian, and while you remain here, you shall obey me — for your own good.'

'Very well. While I am here, I shall obey.'

'Quite right.'

Without further reply, she walked away and left as she had come.

While the guests cheered this bit of the drama, Mrs. Bascom sat tense. A vague movement from the window had riveted her attention. It was a movement so slow and indistinct that she scarcely could be sure it was not her own imagination. She had rather scoffed at the speeches and acting thus far, but there was something arresting, pulse-quickening about this furtive shadow that sent a shiver of expectancy down her erect spine.

King stared after his pseudo-niece as if in doubt as to the meaning of her last words, took a step and called her name. When she did not answer or return, he shrugged and settled back in his chair. But Mrs.

Bascom was oblivious to all this. The shadow had taken outline against the window, became a man, peering stealthily into the room, though his features were, of course, indistinguishable.

In spite of Mrs. Bascom's scorn at the idea of the play, now that she sensed the approach of the climax — the murder scene — she became excited, clasping her hands tightly, thus wiping out all the errors she had started to count, and wetting her thin lips in the darkness. Something made her uneasy, 'creepy' she would have described the feeling. The enacting of a murder, of death by violence, had not appealed to her as an appropriate subject for amusement, but it was more than a mere sense of indelicacy now. She was acutely nervous ——

'Stop being so skittish, Ellen Bascom,' she admonished herself. 'It's nothing but your own imagination — all worked up just because it's dark and sort of spooky.'

This seemed to calm her for a while and she watched keenly for some clue to the identity of the silent intruder and the meaning of his actions.

Meanwhile, King sat gazing into the light in thought, then blinked and abruptly snapped off the switch. The room became pitch black, except for that shadow against the window where a man waited patiently.

A match flared up as King lighted a cigarette. Its tip made a glowing point of light as he puffed a few times, then tossed it into an ash tray on his desk. The whistling sound of his breath became more pronounced and regular. He was supposedly asleep.

Then the man at the window moved, tiptoed into the room, halting at each step to listen and peer into the darkness toward the desk. He did not turn his head enough for his face to be seen in profile, however, and it might have been either Ruel or Basil for all Mrs. Bascom could tell.

At last he passed out of line with the dim light of the window, became invisible. She strained to trace his movements, but in vain. She heard him shuffle toward the desk. There was a soft scraping, perhaps when his fingers fumbled over the desk or blotter. Mrs. Bascom thought she heard a rustle, then a swish as from a quick, sudden movement of an arm. The gasping sigh that followed was convincing. She shuddered as King's stertorous breathing abruptly ceased.

A thud announced the falling of a body against the desk. Something metal clattered to the floor and she caught her breath sharply to stifle an exclamation. It all seemed so vividly real.

Out of the obscurity a voice whispered tentatively, 'Uncle.' When there was no reply, a woman's figure glided from the doorway into the oblong of light, advanced toward the safe and stooped down before it. Mrs. Bascom recognized this was Sylvia.

The knobs twirled and clicked, the door swung open. A sheet of paper appeared in her silhouetted hand, and she held it close to her eyes as if to read it in the half light. Satisfied with her scrutiny, she tore it into tiny bits which she scattered on the floor, then chuckled, and slipped away through the door as she had come.

Silence — broken by a deep sigh like the exhaling of a breath held almost to the bursting point. A cautious fumbling, the click of a ring or finger nail as it rapped against wood, then a shuffling of footsteps, and the man appeared abruptly before the window. He paused to wipe his fingers meticulously on a handkerchief which he withdrew from his pocket. This done, he produced a pair of gloves and slowly drew them on his hands, just as there was a second sharp sigh and movement from the direction of the desk.

To this latter sound, the actor paid no attention, yet it had a curious effect on Mrs. Bascom. She held her breath, peered toward the desk, and half arose to her feet. King's first death sigh in the play had been gruesomely realistic; this one seemed unnatural, out of keeping with the action. There was no definite reason for her feeling, yet she became stifled, oppressed. It was too much. She must relieve her tenseness, cry out, or ——

She sank back, flushing.

'You skittish old fool — as emotional as a school girl! Stop making a scene of yourself,' she whispered, forcing her eyes to the man kneeling before the safe to listen for the fall of the tumblers in the combination.

At length his efforts succeeded and the door swung part-way open. But he did not reach in, instead became rigid, listening intently.

Somewhere outside the room a board squeaked under the pressure of a foot. A woman's voice hummed a tune, then a chair scraped along the floor. A typewriter clicked as a paper was inserted into the carriage, the keys tapped out a brief sentence, then the chair scratched again as if the woman had stood up. There followed a smothered exclamation, a curious thump, dying away in a series of low, bumping jerks as when some bulky object is dragged across the floor.

The thief sprang to his feet and leaped toward the window, stepped across its sill and vanished. But his hands were empty, Mrs. Bascom noted.

She sat listening, still tense. After a brief pause, two men's voices came from a distance and the clatter of feet upon an uncarpeted stairway. They stumbled in the darkness as they neared the door. A hand fumbled along the wall, a switch clicked, and the room was flooded with blinding light.

Involuntarily, as she blinked at the sudden illumination, Mrs. Bascom turned first to look at the motionless figure, fallen forward on the desk. But under this light, her unnatural fears vanished. After all, it was only a play!

With a smile, she turned to Ruel and Basil who had just entered the room.

CHAPTER II

TRAGEDY

KING'S guests jumped to their feet, moving toward Basil and Ruel and all talking at once.

'Of all the ham actors I ever saw ——'

'The trained dog act was quite human ——'

'My dear, if he doesn't move this minute to prove he isn't dead, I think I shall scream!'

'Come on, let's lynch the murderer!'

'All right, but who is he?' Basil laughingly challenged this last speaker.

His question precipitated a chorus of shouts, some crying 'Ruel,' others 'Basil,' and trying to make the reason for their conclusions heard above the din.

It was a cosmopolitan gathering of men and women, ranging, as King had remarked earlier in the evening to his secretary, 'From youth, almost to senility and back again.' The former might best be typified by Mrs. Tenney, vivacious and sophisticate from the tips of her smart pumps to the remarks that gushed from her carmined lips; the latter by Mrs. Bascom or ponderous Judge Brant, who said nothing, but smiled with a tolerant, superior air.

The hubbub continued as they milled about Basil until he held up both hands in a plea for silence.

'For the love of crime, you're making enough noise to wake the dead there, but you haven't a scrap of evidence on which to base your judgments. How about searching for the clues first?'

'May we question the suspects, you and Ruel?' asked some one.

'Certainly not. We'd only deny our guilt, and besides you're supposed to know all and more than a detective would when called upon the scene. Haven't you just *seen* the murder committed?'

'Insinuating I have cat's eyes?' laughed Mrs. Tenney.

Basil ignored the remark.

'Now remember your instructions, and obey them as the last words of a dying man — Ruel, the papers!'

The latter distributed to each of the guests a pencil and a sort of handbill on which was drawn a plan of the room with a red ink 'X' to mark the position of the body, as in a newspaper diagram. Below this were tabulated spaces to be filled in with the name of the murderer, list of clues found, deductive reasoning, and such details, ending with a line for the signature of the person submitting it.

When these had been received, they all began to scurry about the room, utterly disregarding most of the rules that had been imposed by King, moving the few furnishings and looking in corners and under the rugs as if a clue might be found like a lost jewel or elusive collar button. The curtains over the windows were jerked aside until they hung askew; they jostled one another in laughing eagerness, ran in and out of the open window looking for footprints — and discovering their own! Only the realistically crimson-daubed paper-cutter on the floor and the motionless figure crouching over the stained blotter escaped their onslaught.

The two actors in the play watched them for a time in smiling derision. Standing together, they were much alike in height and general build, save that Ruel's body was thickset with hardened muscles, Basil's with flabbier flesh. But there the similarity ended. Basil Stacey's face, upon closer scrutiny, lost some of its geniality in the weakness of its pointed chin that lacked strength of character; his cheeks were too flaccid, and his eyes were faintly underlined with telltale shadows. Ruel Moore, on the other hand, seemed serious even when smiling, and his features, each in its own way, emphasized the virile force that his companion's lacked. Sun and air had tanned them a healthy brown that accentuated the firmness of his jaw against his white collar, while his clothes, donned to be in keeping with his rôle in the play, were shabby and ill-fitting in comparison with Basil's immaculate evening dress.

After a brief word or two with Ruel, Basil crossed over to the safe upon which he stepped for a platform and began to speak.

'Now that the room looks as if an excavating party had done its best,' he shouted, 'I should hope some one has found the missing link. If that's your idea of detectives at work ——'

His further words were drowned in a roar of laughing denials, while the guests, by common consent, crowded closer to him.

'Every one satisfied he's seen all there is to be seen?'

There were cries of 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'But there wasn't a darned clue anywhere!'

'All right, then who has solved the mystery? — No, don't answer aloud. Say it with words. Fill in your blanks and sign on the dotted line.'

So many objections were raised to this long-winded process that Basil acceded to their wishes.

'Very well. Those in favor of Ruel as the arch-criminal, say "Aye"— contrary minded, "No." The "Ayes" have it and Ruel seems to be elected. "Ayes" two paces to the right of me, "Nos" to the left.—So. Now, how did you know Ruel did it? Answer in rotation.'

'He had the motive. You see, he wanted to kill King before the will was altered, and naturally thought it would be in the safe, so ——'

'That may be feminine intuition, but it's no proof. Next!' cut in Basil imperiously.

'Ruel is the stronger of you two and the victim died with scarcely a sound from a single blow. Besides, you wore a slicker and the murderer didn't. That proves ——'

'Nothing, my dear Watson. I would have taken off the slicker before killing him — if I had done it.'

'I found a pebble on the floor, but darned if I see how that helps, though of course I know Ruel did it,' was Mrs. Tenney's contribution.

'In the name of justice, can't any one produce some real evidence?' exclaimed Basil in mock despair.

'I can,' spoke up Judge Brant confidently, elbowing his way to the front of the group. 'The proof is to be found in the characters of the two suspects. Ruel opposed King openly; Basil was cowed by him. Now, my experience, if I might say so, has dealt with many similar cases and I could cite numerous instances to prove my contention. The man who would take such a chance to kill another is certainly not the one who cringes in his presence as Basil did, or was supposed to do, let us say. That's conclusive, so ——'

'It would never convict him in this court, Judge. — What do you say, Dr. New?'

The man Basil addressed was thin, almost emaciated, with a narrow face and jet black beard. It was a keen, alert face, however, and when he spoke his voice was curtly authoritative.

'I believe the real clue might be found on the paper-cutter, though I haven't examined it closely. There must be finger-prints on it because he didn't put on gloves until after he had used it for the murder.'

'Now we're getting somewhere!' encouraged Basil. 'Look it over, Doctor.'

One of the elder women gasped audibly as the latter picked up the paper-knife by its pointed blade and studied the handle critically.

'They're here, but blurred. Can't make them out enough — too faint.'

'Then even you fail as a witness. — Who's next?'

One by one the other members of the group made suggestions, elaborated theories, only to have them tossed aside by Basil as unsubstantiated by conclusive facts, hence unqualified to compete for the prize. At last he turned to those who had selected him as the criminal. There were only two: demure Mrs. Bascom who looked like the wife of a country clergyman, and a pert young matron dressed in a startling costume of cerise and blue silk. The latter spoke first with the studied carelessness of one used to holding the center of attention quite facilely.

'I know you did it, Basil, simply because every one else believes Ruel guilty! In detective stories, it's always the one you least suspect!'

She received a laugh of applause, but Basil shook his head.

'And you, Mrs. Bascom? — You're my last hope, I'm afraid.'

The elderly woman flushed slightly as so many eyes fixed on her, but she spoke in a soft, precise tone, nipping off each word crisply.

'I have three reasons for knowing you are guilty. In the first place, the — the murderer put on his gloves before touching the safe so as not to leave incriminating marks, presumably, in the heat of his anger, forgetting to do so before. A man like Ruel, if bent on revenge, would not have thought of this at all. In the second place,' she checked it off on her fingers unconsciously, 'you had the only real motive — to regain those papers. No rational man would murder the relative of the woman he was about to marry, especially when he declared money was no object to him.

'Finally, I noticed that you are left-handed. I saw this before the play. The paper-knife was on the floor to the left of — of Mr. King, exactly where it would have fallen after a left-handed man struck the blow.'

A cheer went up from the guests, but she scarcely noticed the interruption in the flush of her eagerness.

'A lot depends upon what those papers were, of course, and I'd like to look in the safe at them. The murderer left empty-handed, so they might prove to be a valuable clue ——' She hesitated questioningly, adding, 'That is, if they were really part of the play as I think.'

At Basil's nod of acquiescence, she stepped forward and swung open the half-shut door which no one had bothered to touch. The others pressed closer to see what would be revealed.

A thin sheaf of papers held together by an elastic band lay on the floor of the inner compartment. It was obviously the one that Basil had given to King in the play. At first glance, the sheets seemed to be blank, but the central one bore upon its outer fold the words — 'To Whom It May Concern.'

Mrs. Bascom read this aloud, then faced Basil.

'It is part of the plan, then, not something personal? Shall I open it?'

'Search me! I'm sure I never heard of a detective stopping to ask such a question, though,' he countered, stepping down from the impromptu pedestal as if anticipating the dénouement that would follow. 'Open it first and ask questions after, would be my advice.'

There was a breathless silence as she unfolded the paper and began to read its contents to herself, a smile of satisfaction spreading out from the corners of her mouth.

'Read it — read it aloud,' clamored the others, surging about her in an attempt to read over her shoulder.

Two men laughingly seized her by the elbows and lifted her to the top of the safe before she could demur. She flushed again, cleared her throat, then began to read:

'Be you so keen as you seem
And so wise as this paper to find,
Some inkling of truth's in your mind.
I'm dead, but you, Sleuth, can avenge me;
Let others now see why they're blind!'

'A cryptogram!' wailed one of the women in the crowd. 'That's not fair. After we worked so hard ——'

Basil snorted aloud at this, but Mrs. Tenney interrupted with an exclamation.

'The old plotter! Now I understand about that will! I've been wondering why he picked on me as a witness.'

'What will? What do you mean?' cried several in unison.

'Why, he called three of us to witness a will this afternoon with great formality. Of course I didn't read it, but now I doubt if it was a will at all. Probably some gibberish—part of his scheme to use it in the play, I imagine.'

'And that's why Basil has been flaunting his left hand — doing things to attract attention to the fact he is left-handed, I mean,' added another.

'But this doesn't help us to solve the cryptogram. — Have you any idea what the jingle means, Mrs. Bascom?'

'Surely. It's the key to the murder or the corroboration of it,' answered the latter, smiling down jubilantly upon their upturned faces.

'Then you were right? It was Basil?'

'Of course. See, the first letter of each line, read downward, spells his name!' She held the paper facing them to prove her statement.

'So you think you have me cornered, eh?' mocked Basil suddenly. 'Yet what if I denied it? What if I told you that paper was only a false scent and not a true clue at all?'

'Why — why that's not fair! You've got to confess,' gasped Mrs. Bascom, her triumph wilting at the very thought of all her careful deductions being overthrown.

'I won't, though!'

'If you don't, the — the corpse will rise up to accuse you!' she retorted with a flash of inspiration.

The guests laughed and applauded her challenge, turning expectantly toward Gerard King. But he did not stir.

'Now, you see? He said he'd not move until the murderer was *proved* guilty, so you'll get no help from him!'

Mrs. Bascom became a beet red. She was normally a timid, rather shy woman in a crowd, though *tête-à-tête* she could hold her own with the most agile-witted. A resident of the village of Crookshaven a mile away, she had always amused King by her good nature and rather tart common sense. He included her in all his house-parties, both because she enjoyed them, and because she made herself useful as a sort of hostess.

The necessity of playing up to her share in the game had, until now, overcome her timidity, even elated her to such an extent that she was positively enjoying her triumph. But this doubting and defying of her proof upset her, brought back a consciousness of her former diffidence in a devastating rush.

She felt she must say or do something, if only to end this torment and turn their eyes away from her. Twice she tried to speak, but a hot lump choked her voice, and she could think of no adequate retort. Then anger, half at her own foolishness, half at Basil's insistence upon prolonging the cross-examination, came to her rescue. She jumped down from the safe, starting over toward King's motionless figure.

'We'll see if he won't help me!' she muttered as she advanced, laying her hands on his shoulders and shaking him. 'Mr. King, I ——'

Her appeal stopped short. The flush swirled from her cheeks and her outstretched hands drew slowly back from his shoulders. Her eyes dilated as she stood there motionless, and her voice quavered as she whispered, 'Look — look!'

Her gentle shake had moved King's head so that now it peered out above his elbow. The face was bloodless, the eyes glazed and staring. It was the face of a dead man!

Dr. New pushed rudely forward, halting at the corner of the desk and turning to face the guests, his expression alertly professional.

'Some of you men carry chairs into the next room for the ladies. Escort them there and return immediately.'

His crisp words broke the spell, were punctuated by gasps and indrawn breaths.

'Mrs. Bascom, if you ——'

'I — I'm all right. I won't faint, Doctor,' she whispered, swaying slightly, but gaining control of herself and resolutely leading the way toward the door.

'Please go there and wait, all of you ladies. Remember, we don't know anything certain as yet,' soothed the doctor, shielding King's body with his own while the women, in a daze, moved out of the room. 'We will join you in a few moments.'

When they had gone and the men were reassembled, he turned swiftly toward the body, bending closer to examine it. There was no need to touch it. Gerald King was dead.

Dropping to his knees beside the chair, the doctor scrutinized the stain on the dressing-gown, hidden from casual glance by the position of the body as it bent forward toward the desk. It was a dark blotch that surrounded a short slit in the cloth just over the victim's heart. Gingerly he untied the cord that belted it in at the waist, folded it back enough to reveal the pleated dress shirt clotted with blood about a small, deep wound.

His eyes darted from one face to another as he slowly stood up and spoke.

'Gentlemen, Mr. King died almost instantly while we were present in this room. He was killed by some sort of a knife thrust that pierced his heart. That, and his tight vest, account for the comparatively small bleeding, for, of course, his heart ceased pumping the blood almost instantly. The weapon was much the same size and shape as that paper-cutter, I should say.' He pointed toward the knife that he had replaced on the desk a few minutes ago. 'Obviously that is not the one, however. Its stains are red ink or paint, certainly not blood. Aside from that, I would have unhesitatingly named it as the murderer's weapon.'

'You're sure — he's dead?' muttered one of the men, unaware of the incongruity of his question.

The doctor nodded silently as his gaze still searched their faces, becoming fixed at last on Basil's — pale, aghast, its lips gaping in horror.

'I am rather a stranger to most of you,' began Dr. New, choosing his words with care. 'Perhaps that is fortunate, in a way, for it will allow me to ask some questions impersonally — without any accusation of prejudice. You see, I was King's friend, and if there is anything — if any of you can tell me ——'

'What's that paper?' interrupted one of the men quickly, pointing to a sheet which lay just beyond King's elbow on the desk.

'The fake will he used in the play, I suppose.'

The doctor was about to continue when Judge Brant gave a startled exclamation. He had leaned forward to glance at the paper and now straightened up with a look of incredulity.

'Fake will? — That remains to be seen. It looks like a formal will in his own handwriting, duly signed by witnesses, and it makes Miss Hawley his heiress.'

'You mean — it's not a fake? It's legal?' The question was Basil's as he pressed forward, hardly realizing he had spoken aloud.

'It appears so. If it was signed knowingly as a will, witnessed by the three parties each in the presence of the others, it would be legal. Yet it can't be! He said nothing to me about drawing such a document. And no man in his senses would have written such a will simply to use as a stage prop in a play.'

'But Mrs. Tenney, I think it was, intimated that was exactly what did happen!' said Dr. New, still watching Basil's face.

'Then — then it stands. But I can't understand ——'

'Is her real name and all given?' asked Basil in a whisper.

'Yes. On the surface, everything seems quite in order. I know it's King's signature and if the others are *bona fide* ——'

'This all appears to upset you strangely, Mr. Stacey,' interrupted Dr. New suddenly. 'May I ask you why?'

'Nothing — it doesn't. The surprise — the thought of all his plans for distributing his wealth ——' He paused in confusion.

'Well?'

'Dr. New, I — It was because I am an interested party to King's estate. He had told me I was to receive a small share in it. Naturally, I was — astonished.'

'So? Well, tell me about your part in the play,' replied the doctor levelly.

'Of course. I was so stunned for a moment, I'd forgotten that.'

'Yet not so stunned as to wonder and ask questions about the will, eh?'

'I've explained that already.'

'Go on, then, about the play.' Dr. New sounded skeptical.

'It was this way: Ruel and I —— Where is Ruel now?'

For the first time the men noticed Ruel Moore was the only one absent from the group.

'He was here a moment ago, I'm sure,' said one.

'I saw him go out of the room just before Basil started to ——'

'Never mind that. He's not here now,' broke in the doctor curtly. 'Some one see if by chance he is outside anywhere.'

He was not found.

'Let us hear the rest of Mr. Stacey's story. We'll make a more thorough search in a moment. Go on, please.'

'Why, he did it — the pseudo-murder, I mean. You see Mr. King concocted the scheme of the play, mapped out the parts and so on, though some of the details, such as the will, the note in the safe, and such clues, he kept to himself. I was supposed to act the — the murderer just as Mrs. Bascom deduced. My finger-marks were all planted on the paper-cutter in advance as one of the main clues — that and the way I was to drop it on the floor. But Ruel and I planned a little joke of our own. We decided to switch rôles just to confuse things and fool King himself. Ruel was to drop the knife on King's right instead of ——'

'But it was found on his left!'

'That's what I can't understand. We thought ——'

'Keep to what you did, please.'

'I've told you all I know. We did as planned. — That's why Ruel's fingers confused the prints of mine, why I challenged Mrs. Bascom and all. But of course he can explain. He wouldn't — couldn't have done — this,' Basil added in defense of his absent friend.

'Then who did?' The judge's voice unconsciously snapped. 'We saw with our own eyes — that is, we — er ——'

'We must find Ruel Moore at once,' Dr. New interrupted the judge's floundering. 'Have you any idea where he might have gone, Stacey?'

'Perhaps he — No!'

'Well?' prodded the doctor as Basil closed his lips firmly.

'I don't know where he went.'

'Come, Stacey. This is not the time for hedging. Where do you think he went then?'

Basil looked away in indecision, then answered slowly, 'I was only guessing, but it occurred to me he might have gone after ——'

'Basil — Basil! — Oh, there you are. I want a word with you.'

The men whirled about to face Ruel who had just entered by the open window. He was breathing rapidly.

'Why — Is anything the matter?' he called tensely as no one spoke. His face was already pale under its tan; his muscles were taut, and he seemed to be under some strain.

'Mr. King is dead — murdered!' cut in Dr. New sharply. 'He was stabbed in the heart.'

'King — dead — murdered?' muttered Ruel, swaying forward and gazing blankly from one to another. 'But it's impossible! I scarcely touched him at all. I ——'

'Then you admit you acted the part of the murderer in the play?'

'Of course. Basil and I ——'

'Stacey told us about that.'

'But King was alive then. He whispered to me.'

'Before you struck the fake blow?'

'Yes.' Ruel did not seem to understand the purport of these questions. 'He can't be dead! — If this is another joke ——'

'See for yourself!' The doctor stepped aside abruptly, and Ruel's own eyes confirmed his doubts.

'You don't think — you don't mean *I* did it?'

'You were the only one near him by your own confession,' pointed out the doctor.

'But I tell you, I didn't kill him! It's preposterous.'

'Words, Mr. Moore — your denials against the evidence of our own eyes.'

'It was dark. You couldn't actually see what happened.'

'All the more reason the burden of proof rests upon you.'

'Proof? How can I prove it, except to give you my word! I never killed King. I swear it.'

He was about to deny his guilt vehemently again, when it suddenly seemed to dawn upon him that the ladies were not in the room. This recalled the matter about which he had been seeking Basil. He became still more agitated as he spoke.

'Basil, have you seen Sylvia — Miss Hawley?'

'Why, no, not since the play.'

'She's disappeared — vanished!' muttered Ruel in a flat, lifeless voice. 'I've been looking for her everywhere. That thumping noise — as if something were being dragged along the floor just after she stopped typing in the play. It sounded queer. I looked for her to ask about how she made it. I couldn't find her — anywhere. The servants were below in the barn, preparing the supper King had planned to serve there, but they swear she did not come down the stairs. She didn't come out the window, so ——' He gestured vaguely, hopelessly.

But no one followed his gesture. All eyes automatically turned to rest upon the will — the will that made Sylvia Hawley an heiress!

CHAPTER III

SUSPICION

It was Mrs. Bascom who took the initiative and carried out the suggestion Dr. New made; that is, to proceed to the house and there await the men in more comfortable quarters. She was still pale from the shock of having been the one to discover King's murder, but her lips were set in a firm line as she marshaled the women down the stairs. The very fact that there was something to be done stimulated her.

The doctor nodded to himself as she took charge. He had rather expected she would be the one to rise to the emergency. Heroism, leadership, bravery — these are not necessarily the prerogatives of greatness: more often they are the results of circumstance, and the demand for action in a crisis frequently produces unexpected strength in an otherwise meek and drab figure. So with Mrs. Bascom, necessity bred courage.

The first rustle of wind whined through the trees, bearing with it the cool moisture of an approaching storm, as they hurried down the gravel drive and into the house, a massive bulk against the metallic sky. One by one Mrs. Bascom switched on all the lights in the lower rooms as if to dispel her own mental gloom by the friendliness of the glare. Yet the women, silent and shaken by what they had so recently witnessed, stood about the living-room apathetically, huddled closer together for mutual comfort and shuddered as they heard Mrs. Bascom's voice calling up the police station in the village.

When she returned from this errand, she sensed their dread and began to bustle about with an air of briskness, assumed to cloak her own emotions.

'Do sit down — every one,' she urged, pulling up chairs into a friendly circle about the huge open fireplace. 'I think a little blaze would help, don't you? It's going to rain any minute now, and a big house like this gets so damp and chilly these spring nights.'

Suiting her actions to her words, she struck a match and touched it to the kindlings beneath the birch logs, then dropped into the nearest chair and spread out her hands toward the blaze. As the crackling tongues of flame licked the whiteness of the bark, changed it to golden brown, then charred black, the others followed suit, pulling up the chairs closer or sitting down upon the low, cushioned bench that stood before the brass fender.

'I can't seem to realize the — the awful tragedy of it all,' began one of the women. 'To think that he was laughing and planning ——'

'Let's not think of that part,' interrupted Mrs. Bascom. 'No one feels the tragedy more than I, but what I want to consider is, whether we can be of help now.'

'There's no way we can that I see.'

'Obviously not. Yet let's think — get behind the obvious.'

The idea impressed them, created a thoughtful silence until Mrs. Tenney spoke hesitatingly, staring into the fire. Her smooth chin was propped up in her hands; her face no longer was animated and smiling, as she drew her penciled brows into a frown of concentration.

'I wonder — Wouldn't it help if we each tried to recall exactly what we saw, or thought we did?'

'Excellent, my dear. You mean one of us might have noticed some little action or detail the others had overlooked?' exclaimed Mrs. Bascom.

'Yes, that's it. — You think it was Basil who acted that part in the play?'

'I'm sure of it. I think he denied it only for effect, to confuse me and prolong the — the game. But I'm just as certain he did not do it — commit murder, I mean.'

They all nodded in agreement, and Mrs. Bascom deliberately spun out the discussion to draw their thoughts away from the horror of it all into more constructive channels. She reiterated that she and all of them had known Basil for some time, had seen evidence of his sincere friendliness with King, hence knew he could have no motive for murder. Moreover, he did not impress her as the type of man either to plan such an act deliberately or to do it in a sudden burst of anger.

'Yet who else could have done it?' asked Mrs. Tenney. '*Some one* was there in the darkness and he ——'

'Perhaps more than one was there! Still, that's useless speculation, as we haven't been told a thing yet, beyond the fact that King was killed. — Wait, I've an idea — two of 'em, in fact. First, we must be searched.'

'Why? What would you expect to find?'

'I don't know! I mean, of course, nothing will be found, but we ought to do it just the same — to prove we're innocent of concealing anything, at any rate. I'll be first. You search me, Mrs. Tenney, and then I'll be responsible for the rest of you. Don't hesitate to be thorough. You see I've more opportunity than you have for concealing things!' She smiled without embarrassment at her longer and more voluminous gown of modest gray silk.

The search was carried out in an orderly fashion, but without result.

'There, that proves we're not accessories, at least. Now for my second inspiration. We still have those pencils and sheets of paper with the plan of the room. Let's each write down her impressions, make a record of them while they're still fresh in mind.

'You've all kept the papers? Good.' She procured some magazines from the table and distributed one to each. 'Use these for lap pads to write on. I suggest we answer the questions given here first — the ones about clues and so on, not thinking of them in connection with the play, but more in the light of what happened in reality. Then we can add anything else we recall that might help; what we saw, who sat next us, and such points.'

'But we seated ourselves in the dark! I didn't notice who was beside me, in the excitement.'

'I did. When the lights went up, Bob was on my right and ——'

'Write it down, don't confuse us by telling now,' suggested Mrs. Bascom, already busy with her answers.

They were still thinking and writing when the rattle of an automobile stopped outside the house and Mrs. Bascom arose to admit the local police force of two, augmented by the village doctor and one other man. She directed them to the barn where the men guests were waiting.

A gust of wind and driving rain swept into the hall, and Mrs. Bascom shivered as she pushed against the door to close it. Mechanically she stepped over to the mirror and paused to tuck up a lock of black hair which had blown loose from her modestly sleek coiffure. As she regarded the reflection of her pale face, she closed her eyes for a moment, whispering to herself, 'Play up, Ellen Bascom, an' the Lord give you strength an' courage.' Then she straightened her narrow shoulders and returned to the other women.

Their accounts completed, Mrs. Bascom collected the papers and began to read the answers aloud, discussing each with its author and occasionally jotting down an additional note which their talk served to bring out. There was little of apparent value in their statements, however, the most noteworthy fact being the wide divergence of inference which these eye-witnesses had drawn from the same scene they had all witnessed.

Just as they concluded the last statement, the men filed into the room with the two officers bringing up the rear, Ruel walking between them. At a nod from the shorter one, who seemed to have assumed the authority, his companion closed the door and stood guard before it.

'Now then, ladies,' began the former, taking up a position at one end of the fireplace, his rather guileless blue eyes seeming to look everywhere except at them, although he was already trying to fix a picture of each face in his mind. 'It kind of looks as if this case wasn't so ballin' up as you might think.'

His voice was pleasantly drawled and conversational in tone. At first glance, he might have been taken for a healthy, middle-aged farmer, dressed in seedy working clothes. His face contained little to single it out from any of a dozen men such as are seen in a village street, ready leisurely to pass the time of day or swap the latest titbit of local gossip.

'It ain't exactly a pleasure, me comin' here to do what I have to do, but murder ain't pleasant anyways you look at it. What I mean to say is this: there's one here as is pretty strongly suspected, you might put it, only before I do anythin' about him, I want you all to tell me what you saw, like the men here have done.

'I don't know any of you intimate, 'cept Mrs. Bascom an' Ruel, but I've seen some of you kitin' through the village in autos an' things, so I'll just ask some questions, friendly like.'

'Might I interrupt your concise explanation for a moment, Mr. Sewell?' asked Mrs. Bascom with an asperity that plainly indicated some personal feeling toward him that was not exactly flattering to his intelligence.

'Certain sure, Mrs. B. Fire ahead, only I guess I'll kind of be "Inspector" Sewell to you all, if you don't mind.'

'Hump! — Well, it might save you a good deal of useless trouble if you'd read these papers before asking your questions, Ezra Sewell.'

'Papers? What's in 'em?' he grinned, ignoring her use of his name.

'The answers to your questions, probably.'

'But I ain't asked 'em yet, ma'am.' He put on a pair of bone-rimmed glasses that sat quite incongruously on his stubby nose. 'Oh, tells about what you saw an' all. — I might have known you women-folks wouldn't just set here doin' nothin'. That's mighty helpful.'

'We searched each other, too,' added Mrs. Bascom shortly.

Sewell nodded, shuffling through several of the sheets and looking at one item in particular on each. He slowly wagged his head at what he found.

'You all seem to make the same mistake on one thing sure enough,' he ruminated, placidly continuing to scan the accounts or painstakingly puzzling out some illegible handwriting.

'He probably means about Basil exchanging rôles with ——'

'Hold on a bit, Doctor. I wasn't goin' to tell that just yet. Seein' as how you've started unloadin' the cart, though, you might as well finish the job, I guess. You sort of worked it out first, anyway, near as I can make out.'

Briefly the doctor outlined the cause of King's death and the true account of the play, adding meticulously, 'It's all very involved — Mr. Moore playing a joke on King by switching rôles with Mr. Stacey, then reversing the joke on the latter, so he claims, by placing the knife on the left instead of on the right. Like most practical jokes — but that's irrelevant. He also swears he knows nothing of the actual murder, declaims his innocence ——'

'And quite naturally too! Any person with an atom of sense could see he is innocent,' said Mrs. Bascom hotly, springing to her feet.

'Far as I can make out, Mrs. B., it don't seem to be much a case of seein' anythin', because it happened in the dark,' suggested Sewell calmly.

She sat down again with an audible sniff, her cheeks red, her eyes snapping at this clever rebuff. But Ruel threw her a look of thanks.

'Understand me, ma'am. I've known Ruel Moore about as long as you have, an' as Ezra Sewell I'd take his word quick as — quicker than most. But as *Inspector* Sewell, takin' words for things is a gray mare of another color. Evidence is evidence, an' there's got to be a mighty lot of explainin' to this thing yet.'

'But, Ez, I told you I didn't even touch King,' pleaded Ruel. 'Heaven knows I had no motive. He's been so kind to me I'd rather die for him than kill him. I've explained everything to you exactly as it happened, and I swear it's the whole truth — everything I know. Suspect me if you have to now, but for God's sake let's do something — find Miss Hawley before — before anything more happens.'

At his outburst, Mrs. Bascom sat up straight and looked about her at the women. In her agitation she had not missed Sylvia before.

'What do you mean, Ruel? Where is she?'

'God knows, Mrs. B. She's disappeared!' groaned Ruel, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

Thoughtlessly he raised the back of his hand to wipe it away, then seemed to recall he was not out in the fields so drew out his handkerchief instead.

'Yes, and the will King made and left on —— What's that?' finished the judge sharply, pointing to Ruel's hand.

Stupidly Ruel stared at the handkerchief he held. It was stained with great spots of red.

'It's blood, Ruel. Where'd it come from?'

'I — I don't know, Ez.'

'He wiped his hands on it in the play just after the murder! We all saw him do it,' interrupted the judge.

'So? Well, it just seems, Ruel, as if that was one of them last straws they talk about. I guess I'll have to ask you to come along down with me a spell.' Sewell's words were delivered in a tone that made them sound more like some pleasant invitation than an official arrest. 'You go along with Pete there, an' I'll see you later. — 'Course, it ain't exactly legal, arrestin' you without no warrant this way, but you can sue me for false arrest if you're a mind to. I figure it's best you go peaceable, anyway, an' we'll tend to the rest later.'

The man at the door stepped forward obediently, but he did not touch Ruel, merely stood by his side until he turned to move away.

'I'm sorry, Ruel, old man, but don't worry. It'll come out all right,' sympathized Basil. Ruel did not seem to hear.

'Ezra Sewell, the Lord forgive me for callin' you a fool!' sputtered Mrs. Bascom. 'Of all the idiotic, preposterous ——'

'There now, Mrs. B., save all them dictionary words for a more understandin' critter than me, who's just doin' a duty as plain as the nose on your face — not speakin' personal, I mean to say. — Get along, you two.' But his suggestion was unnecessary; Ruel and the officer had gone.

'Now, then, folks, there's lots to be tended to yet. First off, what'll I do with you all?' He addressed the question to them as if seriously awaiting an answer.

'Of course we're at your mercy — your command, Inspector,' suggested one of the men, not too seriously in view of the latter's rather casual methods. 'We want to do everything we can to help, but what about to-morrow? I, for one, must get back to business, and, besides, this house — after to-night ——'

'I was just considerin' all that, mister. Now seems to me kind of useless, keepin' you all here, though, on the other side of the fence, seems as if I ought to. Well, since you've been searched an' with the women-folks' statements an' names, I guess you can go. You leave me your names too an' where I can get you if needs be, an' I guess that'll be enough.'

'I'm sure I can arrange for a few days' leave. I'll stay,' said Judge Brant quickly. 'Naturally I want to help, and there's the question of the will to investigate.'

'That's fine. — An' you'll stay too, Doctor, at least till after the inquest?'

'Of course if you really need me I'll manage it somehow,' answered the latter, a little reluctantly.

'Good. — I do, 'cause I'll need your testimony, professional like. Now, if you other gentlemen will give me your names an' addresses an' telephone numbers, please, I'll be much obliged.'

One by one they gave the required information while Sewell laboriously wrote it down in a tattered notebook he drew from his pocket, using a borrowed pencil which he wet with his tongue frequently. This done, he made a stiff, awkward bow and walked out of the room after requesting the doctor, the judge, and Basil Stacey to accompany him.

'Well, of all the unprepossessing, comedy "constabules" I ever saw!' exclaimed Mrs. Tenney in a voice that certainly must have reached that dignitary's ears.

'Fool! — I will say it — fool!' muttered Mrs. Bascom. 'Oh, Basil, wait a minute.'

She detained him at the door, questioning him about the mysterious will and Sylvia's disappearance. When he had answered briefly, she seized him by the arm excitedly.

'Somethin' has happened to her. She'd never go off like that of her own free will.'

'I'm sure of it, Mrs. B., and I mean to start on a search for her right away. This — this Sewell dismisses her disappearance by saying that if she's abducted, she'd be far away and well hidden by now, while the murder is more important to investigate first. But I'm going to tell him I'm off to find her — this minute.'

'You will — you must,' whispered Mrs. Bascom to herself as he hurried down the hall after the other three men.

Rain was pelting down in drenching streams as he ran the few steps between the house and barn, struggling into a raincoat he snatched up from the hall. The others had made a dash for it unmindful of the storm, and were just ascending the stairs when Basil called out.

'Inspector Sewell, you don't need me here, do you? I'm going to find Miss Hawley.'

It was more an assertion than a question, and he started out into the rain again before Sewell slowly answered, 'I calculate that's a good idea, young man. Go to it.'

Continuing up the stairs, Ezra led the way directly to King's workshop and switched on the lights. The room was now empty, for the village doctor and his helper had removed King's body to the house while the inquiry was taking place in the living-room. Yet there was a feeling of tragedy and confusion about the room still. The curtains hung drunkenly before the rain-dripping windows, the chairs, which had not been removed for the ladies' use in the next room, were pushed about in uneven rows; King's dressing-gown, taken off for an examination of the wound, lay draped over the back of the desk chair. Everything either directly or indirectly heightened the lingering horror of the drama which had so recently taken place there.

The wind whined above the streaming rain, lashing the trees and whistling around the corners of the barn like a banshee.

'It sounds almost as if some one were calling,' shuddered the judge.

'Yep, it's a funny thing, about winds. Seems like they always follow your mood; sigh restful when you're happy, an' mournful when you're sad,' commented Sewell, motioning the two men to remain by the door. Then his voice became crisp, dropped its drawl, though his easy-going manner did not change. 'Just let me take a look about before you come in, though there's not much use, since every one's mussed about so already.'

Slowly, almost indifferently, it seemed, he walked once about the room without stopping, his eyes flitting from one object to another. This done, he examined each of the windows in turn. The one which had been used as a door in the play was now closed to shut out the storm, and he muttered as he gazed out of it, 'No chance for marks on that glass or sill after that washin'.' The other two were locked and equally uninteresting.

'Let's see now. This barn's built into the side of the orchard hill, ain't it, so instead of this bein' the second-story floor as it should be, all them windows open right on the ground.'

'That's right,' approved the judge, 'except that, due to the irregularity of the slope, two of them are about a foot above the ground. The opened one is on the ground level, though.'

'Um, that don't help any. The other two were locked. — You said only the desk light was on?' Sewell lighted it, then walked over to one of the empty chairs and sat down in it. 'Switch off the rest so I can see how it looked.'

When this had been done, he studied the desk in silence.

'Now one of you go over there an' turn off the desk light.'

Dr. New did this.

'Move around a bit. — You're movin' now? —

Hmm. That's enough. The floor's squeaky an' it's black as a bat so I couldn't see you.'

'That's exactly the way it appeared during the play, except for the opened window.'

'What do you mean by that, Judge?'

'It wasn't raining then, so was a little lighter. We could see whatever moved in front of it — as when the men entered the window or when Miss Hawley came in the door between us and it. There was only light enough to make out silhouettes, not details, of course.'

Sewell advanced toward the desk once more and stared down at the stained blotter.

'Pretty positive that ain't blood, Doctor?'

'Sure of it. It's red ink from the bottle you saw in the desk drawer. King probably spilled it while the room was dark to carry out the illusion. Besides, the very way the body leaned, the wound and blood were below the level of the desk.'

'Like this, eh?'

Sewell sat down in the chair and bent forward, though refraining from touching the blotter.

'That, or possibly a little farther forward.'

Sewell held his position without replying, for he had noticed certain indentations in the otherwise smooth blotter — marks very indistinct due to the dampening it had received from the ink, yet clear enough to show some one had written at the desk since the fresh blotter had been placed there. It looked like a single word.

'Happen to know if this was a new blotter or when it was last changed?'

The men shook their heads in the negative.

'Wonder if any one else could tell me that?'

'Probably Miss Hawley or one of the men in the play.'

'Sure. Guess that's a point I'll have to find out about. — King didn't do no writin' durin' the play, did he?'

'No, unless it was in the dark. Why do you ask?'

'I was just wonderin'.'

Sewell took up the dressing-gown to examine it closely. He measured with his eye the rent that the knife had made, estimating it was less than two inches in length. Something rustled in one of the pockets as he handled it, and he drew out a small slip of paper. It was slightly wrinkled and torn on one edge, while on it was a single row of penciled figures — '2 4 5 7 8.' The numbers were unevenly spaced and irregular as if hastily done, each approximately an inch in height.

He was about to replace this in the pocket as unimportant for the present, when his eyes fell again upon the marks on the blotter. Bending forward as if to hold the paper nearer the light to study it, he compared the figures with the indentations. Obviously they coincided! This information he kept to himself, though he showed the figures on the paper to the men.

'Make anythin' out of that?'

'About the right length for an auto license,' suggested the doctor.

'It ain't King's, 'cause I've seen it often. But that's an idea. What do you say, Judge?'

'Might be anything — or nothing,' responded the latter absently, shuddering at the sound of the wind. 'What a night!'

Inspector Sewell nodded, carefully folded the slip and placed it in his worn notebook.

'This secretary, Miss Hawley, maybe she'd know that too, leastwise she would if any one, I guess. Seems like she might know lots of things, only she ain't here to tell 'em. Hope maybe Basil finds somethin' about her.'

'That reminds me. What do you make of this will affair?' questioned the judge. 'I don't like it. I was in King's confidence and certainly he mentioned nothing about such a radical change in his will to me.'

'Don't make nothin' — yet. The point of law is up to you, an' the rest — well, we'll see later.'

'But she's disappeared, whether by force or ——'

'Hold on, there. I ain't exactly worryin' about her — now. Got enough else on my mind. If she's been took off, she's hid by now, an' if she's took herself off, she's either hid or will come back when she's a mind to. My assistant, Pete, is startin' things along that line an' so is Basil. An' that's all we can do for the present.'

His fat thumb emphasized his words by pressing the switch button and plunging the room into darkness. As they passed into the other, unfinished part of the loft, Sewell turned on a second light and paused to look at the small, dust-covered windows. They had no locks, and one contained streaks in the dust of the sill, but it was useless to raise the window for further examination, as the storm would only destroy them.

Just at the right of the door leading into the workshop stood the typewriter desk and chair which had been moved there for purposes of the play when Miss Hawley was supposed to frighten away the intruder. Over this Sewell bent in passing, reached behind the machine and lifted out a paper which had fallen there. With this in hand, he turned to the men.

'If I recollect right, you said she wrote somethin' on that machine durin' the play? Well, now, would it be much — a few words, or what?'

'Not more than a line, I should say. She rattled it off very swiftly.'

'I heard the bell ring only once,' nodded the judge.

'A few words, then. About this long, maybe?'

Sewell extended the paper which he had just picked up, and the men read — 'Now is the time — 2 4 5 7 8.'

'Good Lord — that number again! You don't suppose ——?'

'Queer, ain't it? — An' now she's gone off somewheres,' muttered Sewell as he led the way to the stairs in the farther corner of the room. But to himself he recalled that in the sequence of the play, she had appeared at the safe just after the pseudo and the real murder must have been committed! Which way had she entered, then, from the loft or from the room itself?

CHAPTER IV

EZRA MAKES A PROFESSIONAL CALL

'FEEL sort of confidin' now, son?'

Ruel ceased his pacing and whirled on the balls of his feet to face Inspector Sewell.

'You've found her?'

Sewell shook his head sorrowfully as he unlocked the bars and entered the cell. Ruel continued his pacing without a glance at the door which the inspector had left half open.

'Nope, nothin' to tell about that, yet. — You got anythin' to tell me though, Ruel?' His voice was almost wheedling as he perched on the edge of the cot, drawing up his knees and resting his chin upon them. 'No? — Then it ain't done no good, has it?'

'What?'

'Solitary confinement — sunlight makin' patterns of the bars on the floor — remorseful thoughts, an' such,' replied Sewell, tapping one palm with the bulky key to the cell. 'Now that you're a formal prisoner, arrested good an' proper an' all, seems as if you ought to be feelin' different, 'cordin' to these here psychologists!'

'The only remorseful thoughts I have are that I ever came here so meekly in the first place, didn't break away to look for Sylvia myself before you had me arraigned before the local judge late last night.'

'Any particular reason why *you* should feel that way? — No, don't answer, bein' as it's personal an' unnecessary. Besides, I guess them as know you an' her like I do, can dope out a pretty close answer, eh?'

'There's — there's no definite reason — yet,' stammered Ruel.

Sewell nodded, turned his head toward the corridor and called out, 'Pete, soon as that Basil Stacey gets here, step him along in, will you?'

A voice from the office answered laconically, 'Yep.'

It was nine o'clock in the morning of the day after the tragedy. The night had passed agonizingly for Ruel. He had not slept at all, spending the time either pacing his cell or hunched with his head in his hands, reliving each thought and action of that fatal play with its subsequent revelations, striving to recall something — anything — that might give a key to these events. But the process had been in vain — only served to bewilder him more than ever. His brain ached with the exertion, while his body suffered from the lack of it. His face was pallid, his hair and clothes disheveled, and his eyes seemed to have receded into his head. Yet all this only added to the strength and determination of his face, the weary dejection of his expression.

Ezra Sewell also showed the effects of his all-night search for Sylvia Hawley, yet his eyes were alert and keen. A sparse cowlick over his forehead made a sleek contrast to his otherwise tousled hair, and as he perched there, his arms encircling his drawn-up knees, he seemed a rather whimsical, weather-beaten sort of elf.

'Look here, Ruel, it ain't doin' no good ragin' round like a loco pig. Set down now, so we ——'

'Pigs? — I'd forgotten mine. I suppose now they will ——'

'I ain't. Pete's tendin' to them an' feedin' 'em all right. — But what I mean to say is this: we're doin' all we can to find Miss Hawley, an' don't mistake me neither. We've got to find her.'

'I know, but I can't stay here doing nothing. Let me help, Ez.'

'No, son, can't do that. Me — I'd turn you loose in a shake, only don't you see I ain't me, now. I'm an inspector. I'm the law, you might say, an' if people saw you runnin' loose after this, they'd never respect it no more. It's little enough they do, as it is.'

'Oh, I appreciate that, Ez, but it's hard ——'

'Most things as are right, is. But I'm doin' all I can to make it easy, Ruel. — Now let's talk sensible. You been thinkin' over things, eh?'

Ruel laughed jerkily. 'Yes, but it's no use. All I know is that I didn't kill King.'

'Of course you never, but all the evidence is against you, an' it's embarrassin'. Take that blood, for instance, how'd it come to be on your handkerchief?'

'I don't know unless —— Well, you see I wore these old clothes to carry out my part in the play. The handkerchief was in them, not a fresh one. I suppose I cut myself — I'm always doing so — and stopped the blood with it, then stuffed it into that pocket and forgot it.'

'When did you do that?'

'That's the trouble, Ez. I can't remember any specific time, and I heal quickly.' He spread out his calloused hands; they were scarred in several places, but no very recent cuts were visible.

'Not very convincin' to a jury. — That play now, Ruel, seems kind of foolish an' far-fetched in a way. Was ——'

'But not so much as you think, Ez. That was the reason I hated to take part in it — so much of it was near the truth. It made me uncomfortable, especially when King played his part so — so literally. I hadn't expected him to stick to actual facts, you see.'

'You mean usin' your own names an' you — er — you an' Sylvia like?'

'Yes, and more. King had actually lent me money for my farm, and I still owed it to him. When he brought that into the play, gave me that receipt and all, I ——'

'You still got it?'

Ruel took a paper from his pocket and handed it to Sewell.

'Hmm. How much did you owe him, Ruel?'

'Five thousand — about.'

'I thought so. This looks like a genuine receipt for that amount in full!'

'What? Let me see! I hadn't looked before. — But of course he didn't mean it seriously. Here, let me tear it up.'

'Hold on. We ain't destroyin' nothin'. You see it might prove he was expectin' somethin' to happen — preparin' for it, like, though it'd be just like him to do it on purpose, he was that kind an' generous.'

'You mean he might have been forewarned? But then you must suspect some one else. Who is it?'

'There now, I knew you'd ask that pretty soon, only I was sort of hopin' you wouldn't, in a way. Maybe it will kind of make it simpler if I tell you right out plain — plough right along into it, 'stead of only furrowin' round the edges. 'Course I s'pose no matter how easy like I put it, you'll get all riled up, so here it is. You see, I suspect Sylvia Hawley ——'

Ready as he was for Ruel's protests, Sewell was not prepared for the sudden onslaught that followed. Without a word, Ruel charged like an angry bull at the mention of Sylvia's name, his muscles bulging, his hands reaching out as if to tear away that word from the inspector's lips. But when he bent forward to seize and shake him, Sewell suddenly straightened his knees, driving his feet straight forward. It was not a very dignified way to end an imminent fight, but it was an effective one. His feet landed neatly against Ruel's chest. The force of the blow sent the latter reeling backward until he sprawled against the wall which saved him from falling. Then Sewell calmly reached over with one foot, swung shut the door with a slam, and resumed his former position.

'Guess it would be better, shuttin' that door — keep the bull in the pen, eh?' he drawled. 'Too bad you didn't give your head a crack against the wall — knock some sense into it maybe. Such a temper would most make me believe you might have killed King in anger, if I didn't know you better. — Suppose you didn't sleep much, though. Don't know as I blame a young fellow like you — might have done the same thing myself, if I felt that way about a girl.'

He was talking against time to allow Ruel to compose himself. This the latter did abruptly, crossing over to the bed and sitting down beside Sewell. He still twitched nervously, and dropped his head into his hands.

'Sorry, Ez. I — I won't interrupt again.'

'Hope not — at least, not so violent. You'll feel better, gettin' it out of your system too. Now I can tell you the whole thing, includin' the fact she ain't the only one I suspect of knowin' a lot about this. Understand me, too, I ain't said I suspected her of guilt, just of knowin' somethin' as might help. I suspect every one right now — except you!'

Sewell's manner changed as he began to recount the discoveries he had made after Ruel's arrest. He spoke in short, concise sentences, clipping his words instead of drawling them, dropping his voice from its rather high pitch to an emphatic, low staccato. Intently he watched Ruel's face and followed his expression of surprise and incredulity carefully. It was too sincere to be mere acting. Beyond a doubt, Ruel knew nothing about that mysterious number. This much accomplished, Sewell relapsed into his former conversational manner.

'There's a lot she's got to explain, certain sure, d'you see? But that don't mean she can't set things to rights in a jiffy, far as she's concerned.

It don't stand to reason she'd disappear without some reason. She'll probably turn up with some simple explanation when the time comes.'

'And probably some one else typed that line, left it on purpose to cast suspicion on her.'

'It's possible — so's anythin' for all we know yet,' assented Sewell gravely. 'But I ain't surmisin' things. I just told you the facts as I found 'em, so as to sort of prepare you. If you should remember anythin' about that number ——'

'I don't, Ez. It means absolutely nothing to me.'

'Well, let's try somethin' else. About Sylvia, now. You don't suppose she just went off for some reason of her own? A relative, maybe, or ——'

'She hadn't any. She was an orphan, Ez. She said she hadn't a real friend — outside this village. Mr. King met her at Basil Stacey's office and brought her here when he bought that house a year ago. She's been here ever since, even when he went on trips to New York or anywhere.'

'Hmm. I'd forgotten she worked for Stacey. — Suppose you know all about her, where she came from an' so on? All I know is she's a mighty nice, interestin' woman.'

'Why — no. I never asked her, and she didn't seem to like to talk much about her past. You aren't insinuating ——'

'No, I ain't. Guess I can tell good folks from bad without no autobiography, young man. But you let somethin' like this happen, an' sure as I'm alive, of all the cussed complications an' —— Why, I'd have said I knew Sylvia Hawley from A to Izzard before this. Ask me now, an' I'm as bad as you, sayin' she's mighty sweet an' all, without knowin' nothin' to drive a spike into. Seems like that reminds me of some others too. You take ——'

'Step right along in. He's waitin' for you,' interrupted Pete's nasal voice from the office, followed by Basil's appearance at the bars. Sewell handed him the key and Basil unlocked the door and entered, leaving it open behind him.

'The last of the guests have gone, even the doctor and judge, to arrange their affairs. Any news?'

He nodded to Ruel, but they did not bother to shake hands or greet each other.

It was useless to ask him the same question, for his eagerness betrayed his own lack of it. Unlike Ruel, though he had been up most of the night in his fruitless search for Sylvia, his face seemed as fresh, his manner as jaunty as if he had just awakened from a refreshing sleep. It was the contrast between a man used to regular hours and outdoor life, as opposed to one accustomed to the rush and irregularity of city life.

'We've been mullin' things over a bit, but ain't arrived no place in particular,' said Sewell. 'You might tell us about lookin' for Miss Hawley.'

'I searched everywhere, and there's no trace of her. There was no train out of here after she was last seen in the play, and I checked up on all the known automobiles and conveyances in the village or house. No one saw her after the play and she couldn't have come down the stairs from the loft without being seen by Mrs. Dobson who was in the barn below.'

'That only leaves two ways, then. Number one is to have sneaked out that window ——'.

'Impossible, Sewell, if you mean the one we used in the show. In the first place, she'd have been seen against the light; in the second, I'd have seen her, for I was waiting just outside there for Ruel to finish and come out.'

'As far as I can figure out, nobody saw nothin' important an' did see lots as was unimportant. That's always the way with human critters in a crisis, seems like. — You was standin' close to the window?'

'At the right of it as you face it from outside, wasn't it, Ruel? I'd been waiting there in the shadow for some time.'

Ruel nodded absently.

'Then she didn't come out there, that's certain.'

Ruel opened his lips suddenly to speak, but as neither of the men appeared to be looking at him, he changed his mind, scowled thoughtfully, and glanced sidewise at Basil, then remained silent.

Sewell noticed this expression of doubt, but made no comment on it just then. 'She must have climbed out one of the little windows then, the one where the dust was streaked on the sill an' dropped — let's see — nigh on to fifteen feet to the ground. Hump! That don't seem logical, not to me it don't. I dunno why she'd try such a thing.'

'Her disappearance is all illogical,' echoed Basil. 'She couldn't leave that room — yet she did. Even if some one tried to force her away, I don't see how it could have been accomplished.'

'Nor me, neither. — Hold on. — Now kick me if I ain't the fool Ellen B. says I was! An' me livin' around farms most all my life! Why, look here. There's a door in the end of the barn there an' the hoistin' tackle an' rope for pullin' up hay to the loft. She might have slid down that neat as a whistle an' no one the wiser.'

'Not Sylvia,' said Ruel firmly. 'Sliding down a rope is no easy task for a woman in evening clothes. Besides, there was no rope there, I know. King had taken it down.'

'I s'pose you're right,' grunted Sewell, nodding his head to emphasize his words, 'but just the same it's possible. — Say, you haven't heard all of it — what I found after you left, Basil.'

The inspector turned to the latter and again rapidly told of the papers with the numbers on them. Basil was obviously incredulous, vehemently denying any suspicion of Sylvia's guilt, but his vehemence did not take any physical form as Ruel's had done. Instead he scoffed at the idea of her knowing anything about the numbers, and dismissed them as unimportant.

'This Mrs. Bascom,' continued Basil, changing the subject abruptly, 'she is certainly shrewd — the way she worked out the play and took charge afterward.'

'Shrewd? Hump! Don't need to have no one tell me about that critter. She'd be up to most anythin'.'

'I wonder!' murmured Basil, as if to himself.

'What's that? You insinuatin' Ellen B. had somethin' — ? Say, young man, what gave you such a fool notion?'

'I don't know. She seemed to be the only level-headed one — she solved the mystery and was pretty calm about things mostly. She saw what no one else seemed to take in, and after all she was there in the room.'

'So was quite a few others — all of 'em as much suspected as her.'

'I was just theorizing, Sewell, thinking out loud and trying to help somehow,' replied Basil apologetically.

'Sure, I need help, but none about them as I know as well as Ellen B. I guess I know her, all right — darned well!'

For several minutes thereafter, under Sewell's prodding, Basil gave miniature characterizations of each of the guests, whom he knew quite intimately, save for Dr. New. In this latter case, however, he was able to repeat King's own eulogy of his friend and physician. The result was not illuminating beyond the fact that they seemed a gay, likable set, devoted to Mr. King and without exception feeling the loss of his friendship as a decidedly personal one.

This naturally brought the conversation to King himself and rapidly developed the fact that, although he was accepted everywhere, admired and looked up to, comparatively few intimate details were known about his life. A year ago he had bought a large farmhouse about a mile from the center of Crookshaven and spent a small fortune on repairing it. He had moved in at once, bringing Miss Hawley with him and establishing Mr. and Mrs. Dobson in charge of the grounds and household.

The repairs and modernizing of the house had been skillfully executed so as to make it thoroughly comfortable and livable, yet not offend the charm of its age. Externally, wherever repairs were made, a replica of what had to be removed was put back in its place, then a coat of stain, rather than paint, applied, so tempered and tinted that its protective coating enhanced the illusion of boards grown gray-green with time. Inside, rooms were thrown together in some instances, restored and redecorated with the same general plan in mind. Electric lights were added, the plumbing modernized, but otherwise the effect was of comfortable antiquity.

King had taken an eager, personal interest in all this, spending lavishly and refurnishing the house with antiques. Two stipulations were made with regard to the furniture: each piece must be a genuine antique, but also it must pass a test of comfortableness in the case of chairs and such appointments. Miss Hawley's enthusiasm and good taste had been a material assistance in the work.

At first regarded somewhat in awe because of his wealth and power, Mr. King had rapidly overcome the village's reserve and ingratiated himself with its inhabitants, sharing their hopes, plans, and sentiments as if he had always lived among them. His generosity became a byword with them, whereas normally such matters as money or personal problems were seldom discussed openly; his approval and advice were sought on many occasions and never proved wanting. In a year's time, he called most of them by their first names, could ask after their children both present or absent, discuss their affairs and encourage them in periods of stress like a relative.

Yet now that Sewell began to look farther back, he abruptly discovered little or nothing was known of King himself before his advent into the village.

Basil was able to trace his history one step farther, yet without adding materially to it. He had first met King in New York in a matter of business which had resulted in their friendship. King had proved himself a shrewd business man, honest, yet capable of matching wits with the keenest brains and singularly able to get his own way once his mind was made up on any matter. He had quickly gathered a circle of friends about him, a somewhat cosmopolitan group, to be sure, but one that was at bottom sincere in its relations to him and each other. He enjoyed having them about him, took a special pleasure in entertaining them without thought of reciprocation or those formalities of social life that can prove a bane as well as a blessing.

For two years King had lived alone, enlarging his income by clever ventures into business where everything seemed to turn to his profit. Then his hobby — the writing of stories and intricate mysteries — grew from a pastime to a major work, and he retired to Crookshaven to gratify it. Yet he could be reticent, and always was, concerning his past life. He referred to it in generalities, such as to mention some city or country he had visited or some personal reminiscence that had apparently been the basis of one of his stories, but he avoided specific details. Some accused him of having been a detective at one time because of his knowledge of their ways and methods, but he smiled without affirming or denying the fact.

'Seems funny,' commented Sewell mournfully as Basil completed his scanty account of King's city life. 'It don't seem right as I should be the one to play detective for him. He was smart along those lines himself, an' it ought to have been the other way around, like. — But I guess it ain't the first or last time life's mixed things up all wrong. One thing's certain sure, the person that killed King has got a lot of enemies in this village an' a lot of eyes workin' against him.'

'But that hasn't solved the mystery — or found Sylvia yet,' said Ruel.

'No, and I say let's *do* something, get busy. This talking will never get us anywhere.'

'Don't be too sure of that, my man. There's times to act an' times to talk, an' most of us do a whole lot more talkin' than actin', so it stands to reason discussin' ain't always a waste of time. Personally, I guess I've learned lots since I came here to-day.'

Sewell got slowly to his feet and yawned, kicking out one leg after the other to increase the circulation after his cramped position.

'Basil, you go crank up my auto out there an' we'll amble up to the house for another look around by daylight. There's a couple of places I want to see now it ain't rainin'. I'll be along soon as I hear the thing goin'.'

The inspector fumbled with the key, inserting it in the outside of the lock and delaying until Basil had gone. Then he turned back to Ruel.

'Just what was you thinkin' back there a spell when he said he was standin' waitin' outside the window? I saw you had somethin' on your mind.'

For a moment Ruel hesitated, then looked Sewell straight in the eyes as he answered: 'I thought it was unimportant — kept still rather than — well, than appear to be throwing suspicion on a man's word. I guess he forgot, but he was not on the right of the window and not standing still. I know because I took a couple of steps down the slope on the left when I came out. He met me there and he'd been running or something, as he was breathing fast.'

'Hmm. You did right, tellin' me, son. Now why should he have said he was standin' still waitin'?'

'I don't know, but I don't think he meant it as an attempt to cover up some — some guilty act.'

'Maybe not, but he kind of made a point of it, seems to me. — Well, don't forget, Ruel, I expect to hear everythin' like that as may come to your mind, see? Little details turn out big, you know, quite often.'

At that moment the telephone bell rang and Pete answered it, received some message evidently, for the receiver clicked down again after a brief pause without his making any remark. Then Pete shuffled out of the office with a chuckle and addressed his superior familiarly.

'Message for you, Ruel,' he grinned again, 'an' one for you, Ez.'

'Not — not Miss Hawley ——'

'About her, yep. She's back, Ruel.'

'Thank God. Where was she? Is she all right?'

'Yep, so Mrs. B. says.'

'Ellen B.?' interrupted Sewell. 'What did she say? Give it plain an' literal, Pete.'

'She says — "Tell Ruel Moore I've found Sylvia. She's shook up a bit, but she's safe an' all right now."'

'But where — where was she?'

'Don't know, Ruel. All else she says was — "An' if Inspector Sewell wants to know where she was, tell him for me it was where any one with sense, especially an inspector like him, would have looked first thing."'

'Hump. I notice she didn't look there herself — first thing,' grunted Sewell testily. 'Why didn't you hold on to the wire, Pete?'

''Twasn't no use when she hung up, Ez. Guess I know Ellen B.!'

A loud report and chugging from the yard announced that the auto was ready to perform its duty. Sewell slammed the cell gate and, ignoring Ruel's pleas to be allowed to accompany him, stamped hurriedly away.

CHAPTER V

MRS. BASCOM LAYS A GHOST

As the last automobile load of the guests turned into the road toward the village, Mrs. Bascom heaved a sigh of relief and leaned back against the piazza rail. She enjoyed them usually, but her self-appointed task of hostess had not been an easy one this time.

Gradually the hum of motors faded into the distance, giving way to the chatter of birds and the gentle rustling of leaves in the cooling morning breeze. The smell of warm oil and gasoline fumes dissipated slowly, routed by the clean odors of freshly dampened earth, flowers, and hayfields filled with clover. The sun, poised in a deep blue sky washed clear by the night's rain, was comfortably warm and friendly, softening the lines on Mrs. Bascom's face, bringing out the healthy color of its skin, the benignity yet firmness of its expression, and adding lustrous highlights in her rather tightly drawn, dark hair.

Scarcely had her slender body relaxed, however, when she straightened up and admonished herself audibly.

'Ellen Bascom, you're a lazy, idlin' woman. Where's your gumption?'

As if this self-imposed taunt had goaded her to action, she walked halfway down the curved drive, then swung about to survey the house and grounds.

She knew this was the best spot from which to view both house and barn together, for it afforded a clear vista between the elm trees that shaded the lawn.

Her eyes rapidly swept over the familiar house with its air of sturdiness and age. It was only two stories high, the peaked gable adding an unfinished attic, but it gave the impression of being a spacious house. Originally square, two wings had been added some time before King bought it, thus almost doubling the floor space. One of these additions remained exactly as it had formerly been, but in the other, rooms had been thrown together on the lower floor to make the large sitting-room and smaller den behind it. A square hall with narrow, yet not ungraceful, stairs leading straight up to the second floor, opened on the left into the sitting-room, on the right into a library, back of which lay the smoking-room, dining-room, and kitchen.

Mentally reviewing this house plan and studying its exterior as if it might hold some secret, she remembered how children had always called it the 'Smiling House,' pointing to the broad piazza across its entire front as the mouth, its second-story windows as eyes, and the chimney as a rakishly cocked hat. Now its smile seemed to become a leer, and the ells and wings stretched out, not in their former friendliness, but as if to shrink away from the main body itself. What had been skillfully counterfeited age seemed too vividly old, about to fall apart with the passing of its master. — But such fancies were not for practical minds.

Mrs. Bascom deliberately turned her attention to the barn. It stood about ten yards to the rear of the house and was built into a low hill that formed a background for both buildings. Although two full stories in front, the second floor was on a level with the hill at the back, thus bringing King's workroom almost flush with its slope. Small windows in double rows punctuated the sides of the barn, terminating in the larger French window at the back.

The huge doors stood open now, giving a glimpse of the small box stalls, some of which King had converted into places for his own and his guests' automobiles. They were still hung with bits of harness, and the disused implements of the farm of which they had once been a vital part. Her eyes rested for a moment on the short length of frayed rope swinging from the wooden crane over the smaller door on the second floor where hay had once been hoisted for storage, passed on to the stone wall that cut a line across the hill just back of the barn, returned to the open doorway just as a man hurried out of it almost fearfully.

It was 'Jake' Dobson, King's man of all trades and husband to Martha, the housekeeper. He was bareheaded and clad in overalls, though the shoulder straps had not been adjusted and trailed behind him as he hurried toward the house. They caught on a stone and jerked him backward with a startled cry. As he stooped to free himself, Mrs. Bascom hastened toward him.

''Morning, Jake. — Sakes alive, you look as scared as if you'd seen a ghost!' she remarked.

'I have!' replied Jake unexpectedly, his red face now crimson as he straightened up and adjusted the suspenders fumblingly to his shoulders.

'Stuff and nonsense. — Where?'

'Well, I ain't exactly seen a speerit, ma'am, but it's a-moanin' terrible in the barn. I — I was just a-goin' to tell Marthy about it before we — before I tried to find it.'

Mrs. Bascom snorted and made a clicking sound with her teeth which seemed as expressive as a whole volley of sarcasm.

'You come along with me, Jake Dobson, an' let me listen to your ghost,' she called scathingly as she started toward the barn. He hesitated, then followed sheepishly.

'I was just puttin' on my jeans when it began to moan awful bad. It wasn't wind either. I'm used to that. It was more like ——'

'Keep still. How do you expect me to listen to spirits with your voice jabberin' in my ears.'

Jake halted, abashed, keeping near the open door while Mrs. Bascom walked firmly into the friendly muskiness of the barn.

'Where were you standing, by the peg where you hang your things?'

He nodded silently, his eyes rolling about as if in search of some dread shape.

At that moment a low moan, faint, but more human than ghostly, reached Mrs. Bascom's ears. It seemed to come from one of the stalls, and she listened breathlessly to locate which one. The moan changed to a muffled call, a cry of 'Help — help' followed by a slow tapping sound.

Without hesitation, Mrs. Bascom scurried toward one of the box stalls, disappeared inside, only to reappear and hurry toward the stairs.

'It's Sylvia,' she called out to Jake. 'Get Martha — quick.'

'Sylvia Hawley? Where — What —?'

'Don't stand there gapin' like an idiot. Bring Martha up here.' Her final words floated down from above as she disappeared up the narrow stairs.

Bewildered, Jake obeyed, stammering so badly that his wife thought something had happened to Mrs. Bascom and came on the run. When she had reached the loft, she stopped short in amazement and relief. By the farther wall knelt Mrs. Bascom, bending over a grain chute in the floor and calling little inarticulate words of sympathy down it. At Martha's approach she turned her head for a quick explanation.

'It's Sylvia. She's been down the chute all this time. — Tell Jake to fetch up a rope.'

This Martha did, and there was no hesitation in Jake's movements when she issued instructions!

Then began the somewhat awkward rescue. Martha held one end of the rope, her husband the other, while Mrs. Bascom lay flat on the floor, reaching down the chute to help as best she could as Sylvia worked the loop behind her shoulders and up under her arms. Realizing this would cut into the flesh, for Sylvia's gown was a sleeveless evening dress, Mrs. Bascom halted proceedings long enough to procure two burlap bags to use for padding.

The rope adjusted, she joined Martha on her end of it and all three began to pull. At the first loosening movement, Miss Hawley groaned in pain, yet called up pluckily, 'It's my ankle. But I can stand — anything — to get out of here.'

Slowly they raised her. Her face appeared, pale and streaked with dust, her teeth clenched to stifle the pain. When her knees were on a level with the floor, her rescuers moved back a step or two, thus gently seating her on the edge of the chute. She smiled wanly, then fell back in a faint.

'Look, her ankle is sprained!' cried Martha pityingly as she drew up Sylvia's feet from the hole and pointed to her left leg. 'Give me your knife, Jake.'

When he had opened and handed it to her, she cut the straps of the dainty pump over which the swollen ankle bulged painfully, then ran her fingers delicately over it to see if she could detect any broken bones.

While she was doing this, Mrs. Bascom gently smoothed back the wavy, bobbed hair from Sylvia's face. Though drawn, dirty, and streaked by tears of pain, it was still a delicately fresh, youthful face upon which cosmetics and such artifices were unnecessary. Now that her eyes were closed, it was expressionless, save for a hint of suffering about the puckered lips and firmly closed jaws. Her dress, once white, was wrinkled and blotched with dirt from the sides of the chute as it outlined the slender curves of her body, lying back on the floor.

A draped cascade of chiffon that hung from her shoulder had spread out on the floor behind her, and this suddenly riveted Mrs. Bascom's attention. Something had cut a neat slit down part of its length, and the edges along this slash were stained a dark red-brown that looked like blood! Glancing down the folds of the dress, she discovered another slit, but here the cloth was unstained.

Quickly Mrs. Bascom placed her foot upon this bit of drapery, then stooped to raise Sylvia to a sitting position, thus ripping it away from its fastenings on her shoulder.

'There now, see what I've done!' she murmured to Martha. 'But her dress was ruined anyway, poor dear. — She's such a slender little thing I'm sure Jake can carry her to the house.'

The latter did as he was bidden, picking up her limp body easily and moving toward the stairs with many adjurations and comments upon his clumsiness from his wife.

Mrs. Bascom lingered behind, ostensibly to pick up the bit of chiffon and the mutilated slipper, but as soon as she was alone, she peered down the chute. It was a square slide, tapering downward to a narrow opening as it neared the little barred grill through which the horse could munch his hay in the stall below. With the light filtering in through this opening, she could just catch a glint of something on the floor of the chute. What it was, she suspected and meant to make certain.

Hesitating until she heard Jake's footsteps on the gravel drive, she hurried down the stairs and into the stall, pressing her face against the grill. There, upright, its point stuck in the soft wood, was a slender knife! Covering her hand with a thickness of the chiffon, Mrs. Bascom reached in and secured it, hastily wrapping it around with the rest of the cloth, being careful not to touch it with her fingers.

Then, with a shudder, but none the less resolutely, she thrust it into the bosom of her dress and ran to catch up with the others just as they were ascending the stairs in the house.

Once in Miss Hawley's room, Jake was summarily dismissed, and the two women undressed her and put her to bed.

'If only Dr. New hadn't gone to town,' remarked Mrs. Bascom. 'But that's just like a man — never on hand when he's wanted. You call up Dr. Smith in the village, Martha, then make some malted milk for Sylvia in case she comes to. She'll need nourishment after being cooped up so long in that trap.'

'How do you suppose she came to ——'

'We'll know — when she tells us,' answered Mrs. Bascom, opening the window and procuring a bottle of smelling salts.

Martha Dobson swiftly left the room to do as Mrs. Bascom had instructed, leaving the latter to revive her patient. As she bathed Sylvia's face with cold water, her mind raced with questions.

Had Sylvia been pushed or merely accidentally fallen into the chute? Who had removed, then replaced the cover to it again? How had that knife come to be in the chute? How had her dress been stained and cut? Would she be able to answer all these questions or ——

So absorbed had she been mentally, Mrs. Bascom did not notice Sylvia's eyes open and rest upon her for a moment inquisitively. But when Sylvia sighed, Mrs. Bascom abruptly ended her cogitations.

'There, now, I am thankful to see you come to yourself again. Does the ankle pain much?'

'Enough, Mrs. B. But I'm so much more comfortable than squashed in that smelly hole! It was foolish of me to faint that way when you ——'

'My dear, a woman is never foolish to faint. It's a God-given privilege of the sex,' rebuked Mrs. Bascom with her familiar toss of the head. 'And if ever any one had a right to a comfortable swoon, it was you.'

'Perhaps — though I'd already indulged in one or two before you found me!' smiled Sylvia rather wanly. 'It was the pain and stuffiness.'

'Now don't say another word until after you've had a bit of hot milk to drink,' commanded Mrs. Bascom sternly as Sylvia seemed about to add something else. 'You lie still while I go poke up Martha who is preparing it. The doctor will be along soon to look after you and then you can talk all you feel like.'

She bustled out of the room without waiting for an answer, returning shortly with some malted milk that Sylvia sipped gratefully.

'I'm really perfectly all right now, Mrs. B. You've been a dear to look after me so nicely.' Sylvia paused, a hesitant, doubtful expression in her eyes as they met those of the older woman.

She was troubled, perplexed about something, decided Mrs. Bascom at once.

'I want to talk now — to ask some questions and tell you things.'

'You really shouldn't, my dear, but if it will ease the pain by taking your mind off it —— No, that's not honest, not what I'm thinking at all! I'm really dying with curiosity, of course, and I wouldn't be human to make you keep still if you feel like talking.'

Sylvia smiled briefly, and any lingering hesitation vanished. Mrs. Bascom took both Sylvia's hands in hers and noted they were cold and trembling slightly.

'Did the — the play go off well, Mrs. B.?'

'It was too gruesomely realistic,' answered the latter truthfully.

'You don't mean — that is ——'

'My dear child, you really are upset. Hadn't you better wait a while and rest?'

'Upset? No — yes. Let me tell you exactly what happened. Then you'll see why I'm so — so disturbed.

'You saw the play, so there's little I need add to that. There were several bungled spots in it, one in particular. I saw that Mr. King had forgotten to place that mock will in the safe, so I carried in a piece of blank paper which I pretended to take out and tear up. Then I waited just outside the door until I heard Basil at the safe, after which I played my invisible part of writing on the typewriter and moving about as if to enter the room. What I really did was take a few steps backward, intending to move over toward the window to see when he went out, thus ending the play.

'My heel caught on something in the darkness and I twisted my ankle, then, in an effort to regain my balance, I stepped back and fell into space. Of course, it was down that chute. — I can't understand who could have removed the cover from it or why. Although no one used that part of the loft now, Mr. King had warned me about the hay slides and always kept them covered. — Anyway, down I went.

'The shock of the fall must have stunned me, for the next thing I knew, I heard you all laughing and moving around the room. I tried to call out, but the dust got into my throat, and I knew you couldn't hear me then, anyway, so kept still, waiting an opportunity to call when the confusion quieted down.

'It was just then something suddenly rapped me on the shoulder. I tried to scream, but my throat seemed to close up tight. I thought of rats —— Oh, it was awful — awful. I could scarcely breathe for a moment. Then a board creaked, and I realized some one had replaced the cover to the chute. I hadn't heard a sound, but the faint light I could see before was cut off, so I knew what had happened. I should have screamed then, but — I fainted.

'When I regained my senses again, my foot pained terribly and I was so cramped that I could scarcely move. I wriggled, but that only wedged me tighter — made my position worse. I thought I heard something drop to the stall below with a little thud. — You — you didn't see anything there?'

'I'll go look — in a moment,' muttered Mrs. Bascom evasively, as the knife in her bosom seemed to press accusingly against her heart.

'The rest is all confused — a sort of waking nightmare. Once I dimly heard voices and I'm sure

I moaned loudly, but no one seemed to hear me. Then I dozed or fainted and dreamed — horrible things — that Mr. King was really dead — that I was in some way respon ——'

'Hush, my dear,' soothed Mrs. Bascom, scarcely realizing what she was saying. 'You were hurt, frightened. No wonder you dreamed such things.'

'But they were so vivid, so real. The cover being replaced so furtively — I couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was horribly wrong. Once before, when I was alone in that room just before the play, it seemed as if some one was there — something sinister —— Oh, it was only fancy, wasn't it?' pleaded Sylvia half hysterically.

'There now. Don't bother your tired brain with such —— Ah, that's the doctor's car,' said Mrs. Bascom with heartfelt relief at the interruption, for she did not know what to say or how to conceal her own agitation longer.

With an air of brisk authority, she smoothed the bedclothes, caught up Sylvia's hastily discarded garments and modestly thrust them into the closet, then hurried into the hall to usher in the doctor. Calling Martha to the room to assist him, she stumbled away to be alone and think. Her feet carried her automatically toward the barn, her hand clutching at the bosom of her dress.

Straight to the box stall she went, then drew out the knife to examine it. Unwrapped from the cloth, she held it flat in the palm of her hand, one fold of the cloth between it and her fingers. It was a slender knife with a carved hilt, made to represent a sword. Its tapering silver blade was clotted toward the tip with blood, and looked exceedingly sharp on both edges. She was sure she had seen it before, somewhere in King's house, and obviously it was the weapon used to murder him.

Wrapping it up in the cloth, she tucked it into her dress again and stood motionless, tense with her own speculations. She did not doubt Sylvia's rather disjointed story, appreciated some of her vague fears and dreams while penned in the chute. Yet why should they have taken so definite a form — a premonition of tragedy? Some one had dropped the knife down there — it was the touch on the shoulder Sylvia had felt, accounted for the cut, smeared cascade on her dress. But had this person also removed the cover to the chute purposely to trap her? No, for then he would not have tossed the knife there, unless he meant to cast suspicion on her directly. But who — why had any one wanted to kill Mr. King?

Mrs. Bascom shuddered as the knife weighed against her heart like an icy finger. For a moment she stood gazing blankly at the wall of the stall, then shook herself as if to shuffle off by some physical act her mental doubts and fears.

'The Lord willin', we'll do it, Ellen Bascom,' she muttered rather ambiguously, took a few deep breaths to calm her heaving breast, then hurried back to the house to telephone her message to Inspector Sewell. Its very words attested to her recovered equilibrium and the resumption of her former spirit!

It was well she was calm again, for the doctor, when he came down the stairs, was solemn and perturbed.

'It's nothing serious?'

'Merely a sprain and, of course, the nervous strain. I left a mild sleeping powder in case it's needed. — Why didn't you tell me she did not know about King?'

'Do you mean to say you blurted out *that?*'

Before he could answer, she was halfway up the stairs. She hurried to Sylvia's room and sat down beside her on the bed, impulsively seizing both her hands. Sylvia was pale, her eyes fixed in a vacant stare on the opposite wall. Yet when they turned to meet Mrs. Bascom's, they seemed more thoughtful than irrational, and her voice was quite low and steady.

'I know now that Mr. King is dead. Tell me — everything.'

In a flash Mrs. Bascom made up her mind to do so. This was no time for evasions or half truths; only the whole of it would ease the confused questioning in Sylvia's mind and enable her to get the rest she required. Without preamble, therefore, she retold the facts of the murder as they were known to her, including the switching of rôles in the play, the dilemma of King's will, and Ruel's detention. At this latter fact, Sylvia's eyes closed suddenly. She had received all these details in silence, her eyes never leaving Mrs. Bascom's face, her own blank of expression. But the mention of Ruel's imprisonment seemed to affect her in some way — just how, Mrs. Bascom could only guess.

'Did you look — in the stall?' Sylvia's eyes flew open once more. 'Was anything there in the chute?'

'I looked. There was nothing there,' replied Mrs. Bascom steadily. 'Now you really must rest, my dear. We must all keep our wits about us and be ready to do our share — for Mr. King.'

It was exactly the right note to strike, and Sylvia took the opiate willingly while Mrs. Bascom talked soothingly and smoothed the pillow.

'Of course the will was just part of the play,' she concluded. 'Judge Brant will tend to all that for you, do whatever is necessary along legal lines. He is keeping it now, I believe. There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about, so ——'

She paused. Sylvia's eyes were closed. A few minutes later the drug and the physical strain had overcome her resistance and Sylvia was asleep.

The sound of a motor, grinding up the drive, announced the arrival of Inspector Sewell and Basil whom Mrs. Bascom met at the door.

'She is asleep now, so we can talk here, *Inspector*,' she accented the last word meaningly.

'Then she isn't hurt?' asked Basil.

'A sprained ankle — from her fall.'

'Fall, eh? — You've talked to her some, eh? Well, did she by chance say anythin' about figures?'

'Figures? What do you mean, Ezra Sewell?'

Briefly he explained, showing her the penciled sheet.

'Not a word.'

'Didn't calculate she would, but I wanted to know right off. — Now, Ellen B., let's get down to facts. Where'd you find her?'

Succinctly Mrs. Bascom told him, but omitting any reference to the closing of the chute, Sylvia's premonitions, her stained dress, or the finding of the knife. Her first intention had been, of course, to reveal everything, for after all Sewell represented the law, and this was certainly valuable information. But when he implied a suspicion of Sylvia by his reference to those figures, Mrs. Bascom bridled at his stupidity, realized that the story of the knife and Sylvia's fears might only add to his case against her. Right or wrong, Mrs. Bascom decided to protect King's secretary from such a contingency — at least for the present or until she could work out an explanation that could not possibly involve Sylvia in any way.

'Then the mysterious disappearance was sort of an accident like, almost comic as you might say.'

'As *you* might say,' echoed Mrs. Bascom scathingly. 'Personally, I'd consider such an accident —'

'There now. You know I ain't speakin' literal, ma'am. — But it don't seem to explain much, as I'd kind of hoped it might. — Well, Basil, you get along now an' make up some of that lost sleep. I'll have a look around, an' if I need you, I'll sing out.'

He moved away at a shuffle, kicking up the pebbles in the driveway thoughtfully. His mild eyes had noticed one peculiar fact. Mrs. Bascom's left breast had seemed curiously enlarged and her hand had twice strayed to touch it while she spoke. He noted both these times were also when her story became less detailed, was spoken rapidly as if to cover up something. This might have been coincidence, imagination on his part, yet he shrewdly suspected Mrs. Bascom knew more than she had revealed.

CHAPTER VI

ROBBERY

'I'M not intruding, am I, Inspector?' asked Mrs. Bascom as she joined him in the workroom of the barn.

'Intrudin' — meanin' forcin' your way in? — Well, I ain't seen no one stoppin' you, Ellen B.,' said Sewell with a grin. 'If you ask me, I'd say you're welcome — always stimulatin', sort of, to have you helpin' me.'

He chuckled softly to himself as she stalked over to one of the chairs and sat down with an audible 'Hump!' He had expected a more violent retort than that, but when she remained silent, he continued his study of the room, examining the desk with a grotesquely large magnifying-glass he took from his pocket, then using it on the safe, the chairs, even along the carpet. At length he returned it to his pocket and shook his head as their eyes met.

'It ain't no use. The rain's cleaned up any marks outside, an' there might as well have been a cyclone in here. Finger-marks blurrin' all over everythin' an' not a real clue left. Kind of stumps me, all right. You ain't got any ideas, I s'pose?'

'Of course I have. Some one simply walked in that window over there and killed King in the dark.' She pointed to the curtained window near the desk.

'But it was locked, every one said so, an' I saw it for myself.'

'That doesn't make any difference. Obviously no one could get in there — so naturally some one did!'

Sewell stared at her incredulously, then a slow flush began to mount into his cheeks as he realized she was only jeering at him.

'All right, Ellen B., that squares up for the time bein'. For a moment I thought you really meant —'

He broke off as an idea struck him. Several of the guests had examined the windows that had been curtained and found them locked, according to their statements. They had proved so when he too examined them, yet he now decided to look a little more closely, especially at the one near the desk.

Without a word of explanation, he walked over to this latter window and studied its lock. It was an ordinary bolt affair, securely fastened and impossible to move from the outside. A drop of water seemed to have seeped in somehow from the storm, and he absently touched it with his finger, then wiped it off on the white paint of the woodwork. It left an oily smear. He bent closer, discovered the catch had been recently and thoroughly oiled! — Why? To prevent a squeak —?

The bolt slid noiselessly under his touch and he slowly pushed the French window open. Something gritted on the sill and he stooped down to pick up a pebble which had caught under the door frame. Beside it on the white paint was a scratch and a faint heel mark which had been partly under the door, hence was not washed away by the rain.

He looked up to find Mrs. Bascom just behind him, intently watching every move he made.

'Seems as if you weren't so far off, after all,' he said mildly. 'If I remember rightly, this window wasn't used much, was it?'

She shook her head, stepping back a pace to hide her curiosity.

'Well, them marks look kind of fresh to me!'

She bent closer to look at the blur. Sewell was watching her, and the movement confirmed his suspicion. Something was concealed in the bosom of her dress, for it bulged out as if from a weight. It might be a purely personal article, and yet ——

'Looks like this might be one clue they didn't mess up. — Ha, it ain't a pebble, it's cement — an' cement's on that stone wall there.'

He pointed to the wall which ran so close to the barn that a person might easily have stepped from it to the window sill. A glitter on one of the hinges caught his attention then. It proved to be another drop of oil, and when he tested the doors, they moved noiselessly.

'Guess you must be quite some detective yourself, Ellen B. I'm kind of glad you intruded! — 'Course, you just guessed it, I suppose; woman's intuition, eh?' His glance at her face was swift but piercing.

'Yes, I — I was only getting back at you for what you said to me. — But, Ezra, do you mean he — the murderer — came in this way? Then it must have been an outsider!'

'Seems so — him or her. Looks like he was well prepared for the murder, too. Either he was a pretty good guesser or knew just when to come an' go in the dark.'

'But that would mean he knew all about the play!'

'You're a pretty good guesser, ma'am, or else you know somethin' I don't, Ellen B.,' he shot at her suddenly.

'What do you mean?' Involuntarily her hand moved toward her breast, but she stopped it midway.

Sewell did not answer. He crossed over to the window behind the chairs in which the guests had sat to watch the play. A brief examination of this showed it also had been well oiled, but there were no marks on the sill. When he turned to face Mrs. Bascom again his expression was calm, though he was inwardly excited.

'We're gettin' somewhere now. I got a hunch it was one of the guests as did it, came out of here an' in that other window in the dark, then locked 'em again durin' the confusion afterwards, see?'

'What do you mean about me — knowin' something?' reiterated Mrs. Bascom, refusing to be side-tracked.

'Oh, nothin', only you seem to be a pretty good guesser.'

'You're accusing me of holding back guilty knowledge, Ezra Sewell!'

'Nope, certain not. It just struck me queer for a minute — how you knew about that window.'

'I didn't know, I tell you. It was merely a coincidence. If you appreciated anything about human nature and psychology ——'

'Well, I apologize, ma'am, so don't get all riled up over it. — Let me think. — It must have been some one as knew all about the play, eh?'

'Yes, it might have been one of us,' acceded Mrs. Bascom eagerly as an idea occurred to her. 'It was so dark in the room after King turned off his desk light that some one might have done as you say. Any one passing before that other window would have been seen, but if he came in by the curtained window and kept to this side of the room, he would have been invisible to us, of course.'

'Him or her!'

'Why do you keep adding — "her"?' snorted Mrs. Bascom. 'Just because of that paper with the numbers on it — Why, how do you know Sylvia typed it at all? How do you know it wasn't planted there on purpose? Why do you suspect Sylvia of such an imposs ——'

'I ain't mentioned no names, have I?' he interrupted. 'I merely remarked it might have been a he or a she, for all we know yet.'

'But you meant Sylvia, you know you did. And you know perfectly well she wouldn't ——'

''Course I know she wouldn't, nor Ruel, nor —— But some one did. Might have been you! Far as I'm concerned, me an' the law suspects every one around here — 'cept myself.'

This silenced her as he had intended it should, and Inspector Sewell abruptly led the way from the room. When they were outside the barn, he asked a few questions quite briskly.

'When can I talk to Sylvia, do you think?'

'To-morrow, perhaps.'

'An' the inquest'll be then too. You'll be there for it?'

'I've decided to stay here in the house for a few days. I may be able to help.'

'Good idea. Better not say anythin' about what we just found, understand?'

'I won't. How could I, when commanded not to by — by the law?'

Sewell chuckled appreciatively. 'Well, I'm kind of glad you'll be handy to keep an eye on things. Hope you'll call me if you need anythin' or find anythin'.'

'Such as?'

'Oh, the weapon. — Huh, you look as s'prised as if you'd never thought of that. Seems queer to me it ain't turned up — 'specially if one of the guests did it. I'm goin' to have a look for it outside here now.'

Mrs. Bascom watched him walk away with a queer fluttering of her heart beneath the knife that still rested over it. His sudden reference to the weapon had startled her. Had he suspected anything? Had his question about her concealing something contained a double meaning? She could only wonder as she watched his leisurely progress toward the rear of the barn.

He stooped to pluck a long grass stem which he stuck in his mouth, then pushed his hat farther back on his head and stood staring at the window just beyond him.

As he paused there, feet apart, hands clasped behind his back, an idle thought crossed Mrs. Bascom's mind. His was not a prepossessing figure, average in height, not as rugged as many of his neighbors. Yet there was a virility, a latent strength about him which he never seemed to call into being. The same applied to his character which was friendly, likable, yet rather impressive.

This being true, why should he always arouse an antagonism in her which was quite obviously reciprocated? She was not ill-tempered by nature. She could 'get along' with almost every one, and the fact that she was a widow, living alone in moderate comfort, did not hinder her social standing with the other men and women in the village. Yet it was certainly true that she and Sewell were always sarcastic, even caustic, with each other for no apparent reason. Sometimes she felt he deliberately taunted her, and occasionally she had tried to overcome this spirit, but always with the same result. The mood was only short-lived, resulted in a spirited resumption of hostilities. She had done her best; the result was, of course, his fault, not her own — just like a man!

With this comforting self-justification, she watched him disappear around the corner of the barn, then hastened into the house. Sylvia was still asleep, so she went to the kitchen to inform Martha of her decision to remain in the house for a few days, after which she set off at a brisk walk to close up her own home temporarily and bring back in a battered, straw suit-case a few necessary articles for her stay.

When she returned, the knife, still wrapped in the chiffon, lay safely hidden in her own attic. Before putting it away in a trunk, she had studied it with a magnifying-glass from her parlor table. The blade showed no marks and the hilt was so carved and etched that no finger-prints could have been retained on it. Aside from the fact that it was undoubtedly the weapon the murderer used, it seemed to be of little value as a clue, she comforted her conscience.

Once established in the bedroom next Sylvia's in King's house, Mrs. Bascom felt comfortably lazy and picked up a book she found there to read. It proved to be one of King's novels, written under a pseudonym, and she began it with interest. The tale was an absorbing mystery of crooks and detectives, murders and counter-plots which quite thrilled her. Two hours passed as a few minutes, and only when the front door bell rang did she look up with a start to find it was almost dinner time. After changing her dress, she descended to greet the doctor and judge who had just returned.

Eagerly they listened to her story of Sylvia's rescue, pressing her for details which she gave much as she had done earlier to Sewell and with the same reservations.

'I suppose this inspector person has made a more thorough search to-day. Did he find anything tangible — the weapon, for example?' asked Judge Brant when she concluded.

Mrs. Bascom glanced at him quickly, but his face revealed nothing but interest and curiosity.

'No — unless he found it after I left him.'

'And Miss Hawley. How is she now?' asked Dr. New, professionally interested in that angle of the case.

'Resting comfortably and as well as could be expected!' gibed Mrs. Bascom.

The doctor grinned. 'You'd make a good nurse, Mrs. Bascom. — But I gather she's been looked after — her ankle?'

'By our local doctor, yes. He said nothing was wrong with her except the sprain — that rest was all she needed. — But I wish you'd give your opinion too. I'd feel so much more comfortable, with you, right here in the house, looking after her.'

'Of course, while I'm here I shall, if you wish.'

'Does that mean you have to go soon, Doctor?'

'I'm afraid so — after the inquest.'

'But Dr. New, I think you ought to stay on a few days — just to make sure she's all right.'

'So, you don't trust your local physician?' smiled the latter banteringly.

'Yes, but — well, the nervous shock must have been severe. And I know Mr. King would insist upon the best of care for her, if he were still alive.'

The doctor hesitated. 'Put that way, Mrs. Bascom, I can hardly refuse. I'll stay — a day or so, at least. You don't think I ought to see her tonight?'

'She's asleep, so I guess she'd better just rest. There'll be so much for her to do when she can — go over King's papers and answer questions and all. Incidentally, I'm going to stay here too for a while.'

'Quite right, Mrs. Bascom. Just call on me if necessary.'

The two men left to prepare for the evening meal and Mrs. Bascom, observing the inspector outside the window, hurried out to accost him as he shuffled toward his car.

'Find anything new, Ezra?'

'Not a durned thing, Ellen B.,' he replied cheerily. 'Guess I need your guidin' hand when it comes to findin' things.'

He bent over the crank of his car and puffed audibly as he spun its handle several times before the engine snorted noisily. His face was red with the exertion as he climbed into the driver's seat without bothering to open the door. Tossing off his hat, he bent closer to her with a twinkle in his eye and shouted above the pounding of the engine — 'Mighty becomin' dress, that. Seems to fit you better than the one you had on this mornin', Ellen B.!'

With a flourishing rap on his chest, he threw in the clutch and started with a bounding jerk, leaving Mrs. Bascom gasping.

So he had noticed that bulge in her dress! But had he guessed what it was? Did that explain his questions, his first reference to the missing weapon? Or was it merely a coincidence, a product of her own imagination?

A sort of panic seized her. Had she done the right thing to conceal that knife? If he suspected her knowledge, might not he get her into trouble? — Her ideas were vague. She saw a vision of herself in jail, held for — what was the term? — contempt or accessory to something. She wavered, might have confessed it all if Ezra had only remained. Then Sylvia's anxious, wan face seemed to float before her eyes, strengthening her resolve. Sylvia would have enough to face without that. Come what might, Mrs. Bascom would guard her secret, do a little sleuthing of her own before she gave up that knife and its story. And she must warn Sylvia to keep silent about certain phases of her confinement in the chute — for the time being, at least.

The evening meal was given over to a discussion of the crime with the doctor, the judge, and Basil, but it was all fruitless and brought out nothing new. After it was concluded, the men retired to the piazza to smoke and Mrs. Bascom withdrew to her room where she eagerly took up King's story once more, reading it with avidity.

About ten o'clock she went to Sylvia's room, placed some more malted milk at the side of her bed, then, as she was a light sleeper, left, knowing she would hear if Sylvia should call or need her.

King's book enthralled her. She heard the men retire to their rooms, but still read on, unable to put down the story again until she had concluded it. So it was nearly midnight before she closed it with a little sigh of relief, undressed, and went to bed. But she could not sleep as she had expected to do. For what seemed hours, she lay awake going over and over the details of King's murder. Even her caustic admonitions to herself proved unavailing; her brain refused to cease its activities.

At last she fell into a doze, only to be awakened by some sound which ceased as soon as it had startled her to an upright position in bed. She sat there, tense, for a moment, but no repetition of the sound came to her ears. She must have been mistaken, she decided. It was nothing but her own nerves.

Disgusted at herself for being so foolish, Mrs. Bascom lay back again, deliberately closing her eyes and counting sheep jumping over the wall. She had just reached the fiftieth hurdler, when an unmistakable crash brought her to her feet by the side of the bed. Somewhere in the house a chair or some heavy piece of furniture had been tipped over and fallen upon an uncarpeted floor. The sound seemed to have come from one of the rooms on the lower floor.

Mrs. Bascom groped for her dressing-gown, only to realize she had neglected to bring it with her. She crept to the door, opened it a crack, but modesty prevented her from stepping into the hall.

Modesty is an illogical emotion. Dress Mrs. Bascom in a flannel wrapper and she felt quite competent to face any masculine eye — under such provocation as the present situation — but clothe her in an even more voluminous flannel nightgown, and even her curiosity shrank back in righteous terror. Some one might see her, one of the men, if the sound had awakened him too. If only she had brought that dressing-gown ——

A door opened, then another, and she heard whispered voices, the muffled shuffling of slippered feet. Peering out through a crack in the door, she could just discern two figures hastily descending the stairs. Undoubtedly they were the doctor and the judge whose rooms were at the farther end of the corridor. Opening her door a little wider, she listened eagerly until footsteps close by made her close it again quickly. That must be Basil coming from his room farther down the wing.

A blur outside her window announced the arrival of the men in the study below and the turning on of its lights. Mrs. Bascom remembered the window would probably be open — it was a needless precaution to even close it this far out in the country — so leaned out of her own to try to catch any of the sounds or voices from below. A word or broken phrase became intelligible as the men moved about in the room, enough for her to gather that some one had entered with the obvious intent of robbery.

She had listened there for several minutes before the thought of Sylvia came to her mind. Perhaps the noise had awakened her and she might be frightened. Mrs. Bascom hurried to the door between the two rooms and softly pushed it open, glancing quickly at the bed. It was empty!

Scarcely believing her eyes, she looked again, opening the door wider and almost gasping aloud with surprise. The covers were thrown back, and Sylvia was nowhere to be seen. Her eyes swept the vacant room questioningly, paused on the hall door that stood ajar. She took a step into the room, then shrank back again. That door was slowly moving open!

Mrs. Bascom cringed back into the shadows, but held her door open a crack so that she might watch.

A figure stumbled into the room and leaned against the wall. It was Sylvia in a dark dressing-gown, supporting herself on a cane! Painfully she drew herself toward the bed, favoring her sprained ankle, but stepping on it occasionally and breathing rapidly. Once there, she thrust the cane under it, then threw herself down, too exhausted to remove her wrapper or get beneath the covers.

Mrs. Bascom rattled the knob of the door and entered.

'My dear, what's the matter?' she called softly.

'That noise — I tried to get to the door — I'll be all right now.'

'You should not have gotten up,' reproved Mrs. Bascom sternly. 'Why did you do it?'

'I — I had to —— But the doctor said I could — advised me to step on my foot all I could, you know. It's bandaged —'

'There now. Let me help you and tuck you in. You're still weak. Everything is all right. Just rest and sleep.'

Sylvia sighed deeply and relaxed, seemed to fall asleep almost instantly, so Mrs. Bascom left her, hearing the men approaching up the stairs. Modesty or no modesty, she must find out what had happened! Wrapping the puff about her shoulders, she thrust her head into the hall and called out, 'What is it? Was it a robber?'

'Yes — at least, an intruder,' answered one of the men. 'He broke into King's desk, but of course we don't know whether he took anything or not. The window was open — he must have come in there. We've locked up again now, so don't worry. We'll search the house, then call Sewell, so you'll be perfectly safe.'

It sounded like the judge's voice, but as he spoke he was moving toward his room so that Mrs. Bascom had no chance for a reply or to ask any of the questions that arose in her mind. For a moment she stood still listening. Thus it happened she overheard still another brief conversation.

Scarcely had the two men closed their doors, when one of them opened again and Mrs. Bascom, by leaning immodestly into the hall, saw Judge Brant step from his lighted room and knock on the doctor's door. When the latter opened it, the Judge spoke in what was supposed to be a whisper, but was so loud and excited that Mrs. Bascom clearly heard his words.

'Doctor, some one has been in my room while we were downstairs. Come in and I'll show you. My wallet ——'

The rest was lost as the two men disappeared from Mrs. Bascom's view, but she had heard enough. She knew that 'some one' was Sylvia!

But why? What was she doing there? If she was after some special thing —— The will! That was the only article the judge possessed that seemed to bear on the case. She was after the will — why?

Shivering slightly with the excitement and the chill of the night, Mrs. Bascom got back into bed to think. She intended to straighten out these questions in her mind before sleeping again, sure that rest could not come until her perplexities were settled.

Yet the human brain is a contrary organism; given a problem which must be solved, it often plays the truant, closes up shop and refuses to function, while if it has no duty to perform, it creates one out of thin air. Thus, now that Mrs. Bascom had a real reason for remaining awake, she almost instantly dropped off to sleep!

CHAPTER VII

A LIE

'Much better, Mrs. B.,' Sylvia Hawley answered her inquiry. 'I've slept for hours. I don't think I'll attempt getting up just yet, however. If Inspector Sewell wants to ask questions as you say, bring him up now and I'll answer them.'

It was mid-morning. Sylvia had just finished the breakfast Mrs. Bascom had solicitously brought her and now sat propped up in bed. Beyond its pallor, her face showed scarcely any traces of the ordeal through which she had so recently passed. A becomingly ruffled negligee had been thrown over her shoulders and she seemed even younger than her twenty-six years, the slight disarray of her bobbed hair adding to the effect of careless youth and softening an expression which, to the observant Mrs. Bascom, was a trifle too tense and nervous.

Tactfully, Mrs. Bascom set about to relieve this strain as well as to caution Sylvia about certain matters, such as any reference to the presentiments she had felt while in the chute.

'What it is to still have youth!' she began cheerfully. 'One would scarcely suspect you'd even been up to a late party, much less a harrowing adventure.'

'I do look — normal?' responded Sylvia, quite too seriously.

'And bewitching, my dear, to say the least. You certainly do not look as if you needed any help, especially mine, but I'm going to offer it, nevertheless. Not only do I want to help you, but also Mr. King. He was my friend and I —— Oh, I suppose it's all quite foolish of me, but it seems as if I had a personal responsibility to discharge.

'You know I was the one to solve the pseudo-mystery of the play as well as find he was really dead. In the cryptogram jingle he left, telling it was Basil who was supposed to have killed him, there was a line — "I'm dead, but you can avenge me." I can't get that out of my head, somehow.'

'Why, Mrs. B., I didn't know you felt — that way.' Sylvia hesitated, seemed about to continue with some important remark from the seriousness of her expression, but instead she patted the older woman's arm affectionately.

'I know. You think it's foolish of me and sentimental — to take those words literally — but I do.'

'I'm sure you'll help us — me, Mrs. B. It's not going to be easy, but I ——'

'That's what I wanted to speak to you about, Sylvia dear. There are some things you don't already know and I want to advise — to help you about them. For instance, when you used the typewriter during the play, what did you write?'

'I don't remember — some jumble or other that occurred to me there in the dark. It was quite mechanical and —Yes, I do recall part of it. I started to write off that practice line all stenographers learn, about being the time for all good men, and so on. But I wrote only a few words, as I remember, then tapped whatever keys happened to be under my fingers to finish out the line. — But why do you ask that?'

Briefly, Mrs. Bascom told of the finding of the similar numbers on that sheet to those on the paper in King's dressing-gown pocket.

'But I never heard of them before!' exclaimed Sylvia. 'I didn't even know I was making figures at all.'

'You'll have to explain that coincidence to Inspector Sewell, however. Frankly, he suspects you of — well, complicity!'

Sylvia closed her eyes suddenly, thus robbing her face of an expression which Mrs. Bascom was trying to catalogue. It seemed almost as if a look of relief had showed briefly in her eyes, but that was impossible under the circumstances. It should have been fear or anger at being suspected. Yet Sylvia's mouth, instead of drooping, was set into a misleading willfulness and satisfaction.

'Of course, he is only a muddle-headed fool to believe such a thing about you — or Ruel, for that matter, but ——'

'I've changed my mind. I shall get up and see Sewell and the others, since you say they are here, at once.'

Sylvia's eyes flew open again, but they were expressionless and only added strength to the determined set of her mouth, almost a bitter hardness. Her voice cut into Mrs. Bascom's soothing murmur with an abrupt rudeness.

'But, my dear, you don't seem to understand. He suspects you, and I want to warn you about certain ——'

'Thank you, I don't need your warning.'

Startled at this brusque dismissal of her aid, Mrs. Bascom again protested, but Sylvia did not listen, throwing back the bedcovers and awkwardly swinging her feet to the floor. Seeing this determination, Mrs. Bascom closed her lips sternly and did not offer to assist Sylvia as she dressed. The latter seemed in a nervous haste to put on her clothes, so much so that she fumbled with them and bit her lip in annoyance as her fingers seemed to become all thumbs. When she was ready, she stooped to secure the cane which she had thrust under the bed after the disturbance of the night, and, as she straightened again, their eyes met and held for an instant. Mrs. Bascom's showed her hurt and resentment, yet Sylvia's did not change or appear to take notice of this obvious appeal.

In spite of her pique, Mrs. Bascom could not endure the sight of Sylvia's halting progress toward the door, so drew the latter's free arm over her shoulder and thus bore much of her weight as they moved toward the stairs. Here she called to Basil and Dr. New for aid. The two men hurried up the stairs and, learning her wish, carried Sylvia between them to the smoking-room where the judge and Sewell were talking together.

It was an oddly comfortable room, which had formerly served as the kitchen in the old-fashioned house. A huge brick fireplace with a built-in oven filled its longer wall. This had been kept intact even to the utensils which still hung about it, including a more modern corn popper and toast rack. A variety of low chairs mutely beckoned with lazy allure to any man who desired to smoke, spill his ashes carelessly into the fireplace, or even prop up his feet on the low brick oven for sheer comfort.

When Sylvia had been established in a winged chair and her injured foot placed on another before it, Dr. New bent for a brief, professional examination of the ankle. Running his fingers over the surgeon's plaster that encased it, he nodded to show his approval, then resumed his seat.

'Well, Miss Hawley,' said Sewell with a cordial smile of greeting, 'I'm right glad to see you again. I was kind of beginnin' to worry about you, till Mrs. B. here decided to show up the whole durned constabulary by listenin' to a ghost an' takin' him — or rather her — serious.'

'At least I can use the common sense the good Lord gave me,' retorted Mrs. Bascom tartly.

'Yep — only you took your time about it,' murmured Sewell slyly.

Mrs. Bascom understood this reference to her telephone message and began to bridle with another retort, but she did not get a chance to use it.

Sylvia had not smiled at this brief exchange of amenities, though normally she had always been the first to appreciate and even abet their word battles. Her attitude confirmed her serious expression and Ezra Sewell, responsive to a mood, though apparently taking no notice of it, met it squarely after having thus tested it.

'Now, Miss Hawley, let's get right down to the road-bed, as you might say. There's some interestin' things you can tell us an' if you're feelin' up to it —'

'Of course I am. — Shall I tell you what I know about — about the play and all, or do you prefer to question me first?' She spoke in a level, quick tone as if it were some sort of a formal business interview with strangers.

'You go ahead, an' I'll pick up the leavin's afterwards.'

'There isn't much I know. Of course you've been told all about the entertainment Mr. King planned. My part in it was quite obvious up to the time I was supposed to frighten away the intruder by writing on the typewriter. I wrote what was on that paper you found, according to Mrs. Bascom. Then I stepped back, wrenched my ankle, and fell into that hole — the feed chute. I heard the confusion, but could not make myself heard. Then some one replaced the cover to the chute and I fainted. I was in a sort of stupor from then on until Mrs. Bascom found me.'

'Land o' Goshun! An' they say a woman can't be brief!' chuckled the inspector when she stopped speaking. 'Why, you ain't told us nothin' yet.'

Sylvia sat silent, waiting for him to continue and totally unresponsive to his efforts to draw her into a more freely conversational mood. Desisting in this attempt, Sewell began to ask questions in rapid succession.

'Before the play, now. Mr. King seemed happy, not scared or anythin'?'

'Apprehensive? Not at all. He'd worked up the scheme of the play carefully and was anxious for it to get over successfully.'

'Anybody know about it, except you ones that was in it?'

'Not to my knowledge. He swore us to secrecy to insure its success, so I doubt if he told any one else.'

'The blotter on his desk, was it a new one?'

'Yes, I changed it just before the play. But why do you ——'

'Had the room been cleaned recently?'

'That afternoon. I helped Mrs. Dobson air it of tobacco smoke, dust and generally clean it.'

'So she said. — An' all the windows were opened?'

'For a time. I was the one who closed them before Mr. King hung the draperies.'

'Did you lock 'em?'

'I did.'

'Did you happen to notice the sills?'

'Not particularly, though I swept them just before closing the windows.'

'In the show, now. Could you see anythin' when you came in to open the safe?'

'No, but I did not look specially. I knew Basil, or Ruel as it turned out to be, was there in the darkness, of course.'

'An' when you did that writin', why did you choose them words an' figures?'

'I wrote without thinking. It was part of a sentence we typists used to practice on for speed. "Now is the time for every good man to come to the aid of the party." I started that, then tapped a few keys haphazardly, just as my fingers happened to be above them. I don't even remember how much of that sentence I wrote. I mean, I didn't until I was told about that paper.'

'Perhaps you'd seen those figures before somewhere an' they came to your memory automatic, eh?'

'Possibly, but I don't recall ever having seen or heard them.' She looked away in an obvious attempt to avoid his eyes, and her fingers plucked at her dress nervously.

'Certain sure, Miss Hawley? It's kind of important, you know.'

'I know. Mrs. Bascom explained that to me.'

He waited for a more direct reiteration of her denial, but when none came, he did not press the question, glancing sidewise at Mrs. Bascom's face. She was intently watching Sylvia, her mouth gaping slightly in astonishment, a look of incredulity in her eyes.

'Now, then. When this cover to the chute was put on again, what'd you hear?'

'Nothing. I was waiting for the confusion to stop so I could call out, when suddenly it was muffled and I saw the cover had been replaced, that's all.'

'No footsteps, like?'

'Possibly, but very faintly.'

'An' that was all you knew then?'

Sylvia nodded in the affirmative, her eyes darting a swift look at Mrs. Bascom. The latter exhaled her breath with a whistling sound as if she could hold it no longer, then, meeting Sewell's gaze, she flushed and spoke with an asperity that was not altogether genuine.

'What would you expect an injured person, shut up in that chute, to hear, I'd like to know?'

'Dunno. I was just askin' that question to find out,' retorted the inspector dryly. 'Now, about yourself, Miss Hawley. If you'd tell us ——'

'My life history?' she interrupted listlessly. 'I'm an orphan, working for my living and have since I was twelve. I can give you the usual references, of course, but there's nothing much to say.'

'I'd like to have 'em later, just for form, sort of. — Where'd you meet Mr. King?'

'In Mr. Stacey's office where I was working at the time.'

'I see. An' you left him to become King's secretary?'

'I can answer that,' broke in Basil, speaking for the first time. 'It was the only thing I have against King. He stole my one competent secretary.' Basil smiled at Sylvia, but she did not respond to his flattery. 'She'd only been with me a few weeks — just long enough to be indispensable — when I did some work for King. He spotted her ability even when I tried to hide her, and bribed her away.'

'It was a generous offer I could not afford to let pass,' added Sylvia stiffly.

'So you didn't know King before Basil did, eh? But you must have heard somethin' about his life, King's, I mean, before he came to New York?'

'He never mentioned it directly. Our arrangement was strictly a business one, of course, though he treated me like a daughter. I took his dictation and helped him with social affairs, but never inquired into his life. He was reticent about that — quite naturally, I thought. His friends can tell you ——'

'No, they can't, seems like. No one appears to know much about him — before he came to New York — unless you gentlemen do, eh?'

'Not I,' responded Dr. New, 'though I'd never thought of it before. I attended him as his physician, though I gave rather nominal advice, medically speaking. He was sound as an oak. I liked him from the start and we simply dropped in upon one another quite naturally. I admired him and accepted him at face value, but as for his past ——' He spread out his slender fingers in a deprecating gesture.

'It's extraordinary,' added the judge. 'I met him when he came to me as a client, but even as his lawyer, he told me nothing. It was never necessary or pertinent to ask, you see. As a judge of character, I considered him a ——'

'Oh, I ain't castin' no slurs on him. Guess we all know he was an exceptional man. But it's queer, though it's human. We accept some at face value, an' require nothin', an' others we just naturally never accept, for no reason at all except likes an' dislikes. — Anybody know where he lived before New York?'

They all shook their heads.

'Well, now, comin' to this burglary business of last night. He was kind of well off, I guess?'

'More than "kind of,"' said Basil to whom the question seemed addressed. 'I handled some of his business — bonds, you know — but even that was enough to insure a moderate income. Besides, he did quite a bit of writing and publishing, I believe.'

'Keep any cash here as you know about — or valuable papers an' things, Miss Hawley?'

'I should say so, although I don't know accurately. He attended to all money matters himself. He was generous and liberal, and always seemed to have money on hand when it was needed.'

'Guess I know he was generous an' so does most of the village. — Well, probably 'twas thievin', then. Of course when you, as knows most about his things, get a chance to check up, we can tell for sure. Where did he keep his valuables?'

'In a safe behind a panel in the library.'

'Not in his desk, hey? Then seems like the thief didn't get much after all.'

'There were some important papers in the desk,' volunteered Sylvia, looking away pointedly. 'I'm not sure what they were, but he spoke of attending to them after the house-party.'

'Well, let's quit for a while an' let you look 'em over,' decided Inspector Sewell. 'Guess you've told us about everythin', Miss Hawley, an' helped a bit, leastwise about some things.'

'May I ask a question or two?' interrupted the judge.

Sylvia nodded, fixing her eyes on his face and bracing herself as if for something she had dreaded and expected. Inspector Sewell noticed that her hands clenched until the knuckles showed white as the dress that almost concealed them.

'It's about that will. You've been told about the one King used in the play?'

Sylvia moistened her lips and nodded slowly.

'There's one thing that has occurred to me in that connection. In the sequence of the play, you tore up something you took from the safe. Was it supposed to have been the will?'

'Yes. He'd planned —— He forgot to put it there as he'd planned. I saw this — from the door — so carried in a blank sheet — tore it up.' Her words jerked as if forced out by an effort of will power.

'Then but for a chance mistake, it would have been destroyed!' muttered Judge Brant. 'Did you know it was a real, legally executed will?'

'No — that is, not until Mrs. Bascom told me.'

'Well, I've interviewed the witnesses to it, and it was quite in order. Yet I can't understand it. I know the contents of his previous will, made less than a month ago, and he said nothing about altering it so radically. This one is his last, hence stands, unless ——'

'I want it to be probated!' interrupted Sylvia in a small, dry voice.

'No, no, my child, that's the term you mean for putting it into force. Now I'm sure you ——'

'I do understand, and that's what I shall insist upon!'

'What?'

They all stared incredulously at her, the judge leaning forward and cupping a hand behind his ear as if he had not heard her words.

'The will in my favor — I want you to probate it.' Her voice steadied, her eyes met his inflexibly.

'But I can't do that! I'm sure it was somehow just a mistake — a part of his plan for the play. I thought of course you'd understand and help us show that ——'

'He told me he would provide for me in his will,' interrupted Sylvia.

'And he did, handsomely, but naturally he did not mean to give you everything.'

'He has left me everything. You yourself said it was legally drawn up.'

'Sylvia, you don't know what you're saying!' cried Mrs. Bascom, suddenly recovering from her astonishment. 'You know Mr. King had other plans. He'd told us all about them — many times. You know there must be some mistake about this will.'

'Let's hear what she has to say,' suggested Basil. 'She must have some foundation for all this. I think I've a right to say this, as I'm an interested party, you know. He read the clause in his previous will that included me.'

'One thing at a time,' said Sewell slowly. 'Just explain a bit, Miss Hawley.'

'There's nothing to explain. I knew about that will. He told me he was going to make it — in my favor.'

'When?'

'A — a few days ago. I — I don't remember exactly,' stammered Sylvia, her assurance suddenly collapsing, her pale face working, her eyes restless and avoiding theirs. It was scarcely a tone of conviction or the manner of one who told the truth.

'What did he say, exactly? Were there any other witnesses to the interview?' snapped the judge.

'I don't remember — No,' she answered both questions at once.

'But, Miss Hawley, think. If you insist upon this, it will seem — people will think ——'

'I don't care what people think,' she cried wildly.

'The money is mine — mine, and I intend to have it.'

She broke down completely, sobbing and wringing her hands. It was then Dr. New interrupted quietly but firmly.

'Wait. She's not strong enough for this sort of thing yet, Sewell. We must get her to bed again at once, or she'll become hysterical and have a bad relapse.'

At a gesture from him, Basil assisted, and together they carried her to her room, Mrs. Bascom following in a daze, shaking her head from side to side and moving automatically, though she carried out the doctor's instructions quite capably. When Sylvia had been put to bed, he procured a sedative and watched over her until she had become calm and fallen into a doze. Then he arose to leave, and Mrs. Bascom followed him into the hall, stopping him with a touch on his arm.

'You don't suppose — the shock and all, I mean — could that have affected her — made her temporarily forget things?'

'It's quite possible. Of course the shock and strain were severe, yet she did seem rational enough when she first started answering questions,' he replied, not suspecting all that prompted this question.

It was not only Sylvia's determination about the will that troubled Mrs. Bascom. She had heard her story the night before, had just listened to her answers which omitted several details and avoided other pitfalls with evasions that amounted almost to lies. True, she herself had not been entirely straightforward with Ezra Sewell, but that was different. At least she had not told direct lies, while Sylvia —— Yet what was right? Had Sylvia been so confused and bewildered that she had not realized what she was saying? No, not entirely, at least. The presence of the knife, the cut and stained dress proved the account of the tap on the shoulder. And if that much was true, it seemed evident the rest was also clear.

Mechanically she heard what the doctor was saying to the other men as she followed him into the smoking-room once more.

'Miss Hawley has been walking on that foot, Sewell. I think in view of that fact you should tell about what occurred in your room, Judge,' he said sternly.

'I've already done so. But are you sure she's walked on it?'

'I can tell by the bandaging — yes.'

'You went into his room, Doctor? You saw that wallet was lyin' on the floor an' its papers scattered about as if some one had been searchin' 'em?'

'Yes, Inspector.'

'But she stepped on her foot before I called you up to help her down the stairs!' interrupted Mrs. Bascom, coming to Sylvia's aid without stopping to think of her words. 'I don't see what you are trying to insinuate — why you ——'

'There now, Ellen B. Let's not argue about such things now. Wait till we kind of digest like what everythin' means. What looks simple, ain't, and t'other way round. There's Ruel in jail with enough evidence to make him out guilty, an' there's her with a lot of queer goin's on. Seems like Dr. New, the Judge, an' me are the only ones that can tell straight stories, so far.'

'You left me out of that,' grinned Basil.

'So I did!' answered the inspector quizzically. But he did not amend his statement.

His eyes, half mocking, half serious, met Mrs. Bascom's and held them for a moment. No one noticed, however, that she did not try to add her name to the list of omissions!

CHAPTER VIII

THREAT AND PROMISE

THE inquest was over, and King's body quietly laid to rest. A verdict of death by person or persons unknown had been duly returned, then a postponement had been ordered to sift the evidence and investigate the clues, at some later date to be reconvened for further testimony. It had been a purely formal ceremony to satisfy the letter of the law, for Sewell had taken care that nothing of real importance had been presented. He was far from ready for that contingency as yet.

To Mrs. Bascom the proceedings had been a decided disappointment, for she had attended them fully confident of learning what Sewell's real suspicions might be, sure that she would hear any facts or details he had gathered which had not been discussed in her presence. Instead, only the bare outline of the case had been given out, a brief recapitulation of what she already knew.

She was not at all sure now that Ezra Sewell had any definite theory as to the murder. His face was as placid as ever, his manner as leisurely and unperturbed as if nothing of importance was being discussed. Yet that did not deceive Mrs. Bascom. She knew that underneath his assumed air of nonchalance, his eyes were watching every one, his brain receiving and cataloguing their expressions and reactions or noting details that might have any bearing on the case. It was these characteristics which had made him come out victorious in so many deals or trades with shrewd farmers, had gained him a hearty respect and reputation for wisdom among his fellow townspeople. But these same traits led many strangers to pass him by as a quite ordinary, none too keen farmer!

All this Mrs. Bascom sensed without ever having put it actually into words or even concrete thoughts, and it made her realize still more forcefully that her own dilemma was precarious. That Sewell suspected her of concealing some knowledge was certain, but whether this was merely a vague impression or a definite suspicion, she could not decide.

In spite of these thoughts, however, she had definitely decided upon a course of action for herself. Sylvia must be protected until such time as she regained her normal senses. There was no explanation possible, it seemed to Mrs. Bascom, for Sylvia's actions and words other than an imminent nervous breakdown or mental lapse. Whether this be temporary or not remained to be seen, but until it was past, Mrs. Bascom would keep her knowledge of certain things to herself.

This would mean concealing the knife and the stained bit of Sylvia's dress, would require her to choose her words with care in discussing certain phases of Sylvia's temporary disappearance, but she did not shrink from the task, once her mind was fixed upon a definite policy. Perhaps also there was a certain perverse pleasure in keeping a secret from Sewell, even though she ran a very real risk of complications with the law for her deeds. That only added a spice to the affair!

The inquest over, Mrs. Bascom went up to Sylvia's room and found her just awakening.

'Feeling better and rested?' she asked, the sight of Sylvia's drawn face putting to rout any lingering doubts as to her duty in shielding her.

'Yes. I'll try not to be foolish again, Mrs. B. — Tell me, has anything happened since they — they questioned me?'

'The inquest has been held, but only the usual vague verdict was rendered. Nothing else has occurred at all.'

'They did not bring out any new facts?'

'Not even all the old ones!'

'And was anything said — about me?'

'No. The whole thing was postponed until the evidence against Ruel could be sifted, or at least that's what I gather they meant.'

'If I could only do something,' muttered Sylvia tearfully. 'If only it weren't for this ankle ——'

'There's nothing better you can do than to rest and get well speedily,' soothed Mrs. Bascom. 'When things get straightened out and clear in your mind again ——'

'What do you mean? Everything is perfectly clear now. I know exactly what I'm doing, if that's what you infer.'

'Not — not when you insist upon that will, not when you tell the very details that involve you most suspiciously.'

'You mean I've made my position — suspicious?'

'Yes.' Mrs. Bascom was moving about the room, so did not notice the curious expression on Sylvia's face at that moment. 'If you'd only listened to me first — let me help you —— It was not like your usual clear-headed way of doing things, Sylvia.'

'I knew you'd say that, though I'd hoped —— Never mind,' she finished flatly, and the buoyancy went from her face, leaving it cold, aloof, and determined.

'Mrs. B.,' she said after a moment's pause, 'I suppose I told you a lot of queer things about — about when I was in the chute, didn't I?'

'Yes, you did. And that's another reason I could not understand some of your answers.'

'I don't wonder. But don't you see I was still dazed then and didn't know what I was saying? If I contradicted myself to-day — well, what I said to the inspector is — what I shall stick to, so please forget the rest.'

'It sounded quite convincing as you told it to me,' challenged Mrs. Bascom.

'Did it? — But won't you forget it now?'

'You mean your premonitions — that tap on your shoulder?'

'You said there was nothing at the bottom of the chute, so that proves I was only imagining things,' interrupted Sylvia quickly. 'It was all fancy, you see.'

Mrs. Bascom could not reply to this. Caught in a web of her own weaving, she did not deem it wise to confess about the knife she had found there nor the way she had evaded lying about it. Robbed of any retort, she merely studied Sylvia's expression in silence, trying to pierce beyond its blankness to find some emotion. Certainly her words were clear-headed enough now.

'Is Basil about the house?' suddenly asked Sylvia.

'I think so.'

'Then would you mind asking him to come here? I want to talk with him — alone.'

'Surely. But you don't mean alone — while you're in bed, my dear, and in your nightgown!'

'Oh, I'll slip on a negligee, though I guess Basil wouldn't be shocked.'

'But, Sylvia, it isn't proper.'

'Why not? — That sounds like his step now.'

She raised her voice, calling his name, and when he answered, told him to enter. This he did in the midst of Mrs. Bascom's frantic efforts to envelop Sylvia in her negligee! The result was more revealing than concealing for a moment, but it was Mrs. Bascom who blushed. Basil, as Sylvia had remarked, did not seem to mind.

'Hello, Sylvia. Up and at 'em again, eh?' he called cheerily.

Her stolidity broke into a gay smile of welcome.

'Not up, but decidedly at 'em,' she laughed. 'Pick out an easy resting-place, I want to talk to you.' She signaled to Mrs. Bascom to retire, but when the latter did not move as Basil drew up a chair close to the bed, Sylvia added flippantly, 'You'll promise to be a good boy? You see, Mrs. B. doesn't seem to trust us — alone.'

Basil laughed heartily and was about to cap her remark with another, but Mrs. Bascom did not stay to hear it. With outraged dignity, she strode from the room, slamming the door obviously behind her.

In the hall she paused to gasp for breath. Decidedly she was learning things about Sylvia! Until now she had seemed a quiet, self-respecting young girl, but turning on Mrs. Bascom as she had, becoming so suddenly secretive, and inviting a bachelor into her bedroom — Either she was wholly out of her senses or — she was not the sort of woman Mrs. Bascom had supposed.

The door to her own room stood open, so she stepped inside, then halted abruptly at the sound of voices.

Her room was next Sylvia's and the communicating door was ajar so that she could hear every word Sylvia and Basil were saying. With all due justice to her, Mrs. Bascom remained in her room not with any idea of eavesdropping, but merely to satisfy her sense of propriety. It was not in her code for young women to entertain men alone in their bedrooms — under any circumstances. Hence it was her plain duty to act as chaperon, even though unwelcome and unsuspected. She picked up a book and began to read conscientiously.

For a few moments the two voices from the other room kept up a battery of light chatter and Mrs. Bascom read a page or so. Then, unconsciously at first, a phrase here and there seeped into her ears as the voices lowered somewhat and became serious. Before she realized what she was doing, the book slipped to her lap unnoticed, and she bent toward the door to catch their words. And when she did realize her attitude, she was deliberately listening, her conscience ceasing to prick her, for the revelations she heard were too astonishingly important to her knowledge of affairs.

It was Basil who first brought up the subject of the will.

'Sylvia, what was the idea in saying King had told you he meant to leave everything to you?'

There was a strained pause before she answered.

'Why do you ask that? You heard what I said to the inspector.'

'And I also know it wasn't true.'

'How?' Her voice was sharp, frightened.

'Because he discussed his financial affairs with me that morning, told me of one alteration in his will he was going to make, but decidedly it was not all in your favor.'

'Then he must have changed his mind.'

'I don't think so,' replied Basil levelly. 'Besides, you said he told you this a few days ago. If he had changed, it was obviously not in your benefit.'

'Then I — I must have confused the time. — You insinuate I was — lying?'

'Come, Sylvia. Don't get huffy about it. All I want to know is, what's the game? I'm not accusing you of — er — anything. You know I admire your clever little brain and want to help you. I've told you that before and it still goes.'

'I — Let's not discuss that, please.'

'Why not?' reiterated Basil calmly. 'You know I like you — tremendously. I'd been trying to get you alone all day before the play to tell you ——'

'Don't Basil, not now,' pleaded Sylvia in a panic.

'Why not now? It's just the time you need help and advice. I only want to understand your game so I can play up too.'

'Play up?' exploded Sylvia. 'You accuse me of scheming and playing a game, do you? You dare to talk that way to me — you, who sneak about a dead man's house like a thief — no, *as* a thief!'

'What do you mean?' His voice was surprised, but not alarmed.

'I saw you tiptoeing down the stairs just before the — the burglary. Oh, I know what was in that desk — what you took from it. You knew well enough where he put those unlisted securities and bonds. I don't have to look there to see what's gone or guess where it is now.'

'So you saw me, eh? And why were you up at such a late hour, might I ask? Why didn't you tell all this to Sewell?'

'Because I wanted to hear what you had to say first. Also I haven't made sure yet ——'

'Ah! Two minds with but a single thought!' laughed Basil a trifle harshly.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Why, you expressed exactly the reason I kept mum about your little prowling in the dark!'

'About my — about me ——' Real fear choked her voice now, and Mrs. Bascom involuntarily stood up, ready to act if necessary.

'Yes, about your little trip down the hall. Oh, you didn't know I saw you hobbling down to Judge Brant's room, did you? Well, I did. I came up here to search about for the burglar' — he snickered at the word — 'and paused on the stairs while you entered his room. I suppose it was the creaking of the stairs that scared you back again, eh? Of course you were after the will, but you didn't get it. He sent it off to his office for safe-keeping this morning. — Well, what did you mean to do with it?'

'Destroy it,' whispered Sylvia desperately.

'Quite likely, my dear, when you insisted on probating it to-day!'

Sylvia did not answer. Mrs. Bascom could not stand the suspense any longer. Shamelessly she pulled her skirts up so they would not rustle, and crept over to the door. Slowly she moved her head until one eye could look through the crack.

Basil was on his feet beside the bed, his hands thrust into his pockets, his whole attitude one of insolent victory. Sylvia crouched back against her pillow breathing rapidly, her hands clutching at the bedclothes and trembling, her eyes staring with horror. Her lips moved as if in speech, but no words came from them.

That one glimpse was enough for Mrs. Bascom. Quickly she retreated, intending to gain the hall, then enter Sylvia's room and interrupt this painful scene. She might have done so more easily by entering through the communicating door, but instinctively she avoided exposing her presence there, her mind groping to explain what she had overheard.

Before she reached the hall, Basil spoke again.

'That's hit you where you live, eh? Well, think it over, Sylvia, my dear. You've no need to fear. There's an easy way to fix everything, you know, for both of us. If you don't discover it, I'll tell you — to-morrow.'

Mrs. Bascom took a few steps down the hall, then turned as if just coming from the farther wing of the house. Thus Basil saw her, nodded quite composedly, and moved down the stairs with some pleasantry that she neither understood nor even heard. She had just made a discovery. She did not like Basil, had always mistrusted him somehow, now that she came to look back upon their meetings!

When Mrs. Bascom entered Sylvia's room, the latter had not moved, still cringed, staring blankly at the spot where Basil's face had been. Mrs. Bascom's first impulse was to take her in her arms, soothe away her abject terror and comfort her. Yet, as she started to move toward the bed, reason conquered impulse, and she paused. There was little she could say without revealing that she had been eavesdropping, and nothing to be gained by such a course. Moreover, she hesitated to approach Sylvia in the latter's strange, unsympathetic mood that had rebuffed her so sharply a few moments ago.

Steeling herself with these resolves, she went to the window and began fussing with the curtains and shade to give Sylvia an opportunity to make the first overture if she so desired. Evidently she did not, so Mrs. Bascom raised the shade rather noisily and whirled to face her.

'You look very weary. You must rest, Sylvia.'

At the sound of her voice, Sylvia seemed to notice her presence in the room for the first time, caught her breath sharply, and closed her eyes before the light that flooded in the window.

'Rest — rest?' she whispered in a dull voice. 'Yes, I must think.'

Her tired, helpless tone almost broke down Mrs. Bascom's resolve, but before she could move or speak, Sylvia abruptly sat up in bed, slapping her cheeks to bring back their color, and tossing back her hair with little impatient jerks of her head.

'Mrs. B., I'm acting like a — a fool. You must think I'm utterly — utterly ——' She could not find the right word, so left the sentence unfinished with a fluttering gesture of impatience.

'I think you're utterly worn out, scarcely recovered from your experience in the barn before you went through that ordeal of questioning,' finished Mrs. Bascom for her.

'No, I'm behaving like a helpless infant, not a normal, healthy woman. But it's all so sudden — so hard to make out. And I must carry on — alone.'

'Tell me what's troubling you, Sylvia,' pleaded Mrs. Bascom, coming closer and seizing her hand. 'You know you can trust me. I know — perhaps more than you think. Don't you see, I'm as anxious to find out the truth as you are? I'm a woman. I can understand, and help you, if you'll only let me, Sylvia.'

'I wish — But you don't understand, you can't.' Sylvia, with an irrepressible shudder, leaned closer for a moment. 'I can't tell you.'

'Because you're afraid I won't hold my tongue? Because you think I'm just an inquisitive, gossipy old woman?' Mrs. Bascom bridled in spite of herself.

'Oh, no — no, not that. It's just you wouldn't believe — you'd insist I —— Mrs. B., don't fail me! Help me to do — what's to be done. Trust me — if you can!' The last words were spoken in a whisper.

Mrs. Bascom did not know the first principles of psychology, but she did know human nature. There was something Sylvia wanted to tell her, yet dared not, some hint she was trying desperately to convey, yet conceal. Mrs. Bascom could not fathom her purpose, yet the appeal was genuine, sincere, and those whispered words seemed to portend some further trial, some future event which would tax her credulity even more. Whether these words had been impulsive or chosen with forethought, Sylvia's plea could not have been better planned to bring back Mrs. Bascom's determination to protect her. Somehow they made her believe in Sylvia's innocence in spite of the web of circumstance that was tangling about her.

'I do trust you, my dear, though I think you are mistaken, trying to carry some double burden alone. You have the confidence of youth, but that's a deceptive strength without the knowledge of experience.'

'I know, I know. It's what you'd say, of course, but this isn't the first time I've had to — to carry a burden. If you'll only trust me and help me.'

'Trust makes trust,' answered Mrs. Bascom simply. 'Now you must stop talking. You're wearing yourself out without cause. Save your strength — if you must fight.'

Obediently Sylvia lay back, allowing Mrs. Bascom to smooth the bedclothes and tuck her in comfortably. In a few minutes she dropped off to sleep like a weary child. Then Mrs. Bascom tiptoed out of the room and thoughtfully descended the stairs.

In the living-room, she saw Dr. New who came to meet her with a question.

'How is Miss Hawley now?'

'Asleep, Doctor. She seems to be quite played out, poor dear.'

'And well she might be. Young nerves may be made of steel, but like piano wires, they are tightly stretched and ready to vibrate too easily to any note, or even to snap. That experience in the chute — it's a wonder she didn't have all sorts of hallucinations.'

'She did.'

'Ah, I thought so. And she told you about them? Then undoubtedly they are still recurring to her mind, helping to keep her nerves upset. There was no specially vivid one she told you about?'

'Why, yes, a premonition of King's death and — er — rats.'

'So? — Well, that's not so unnatural, though bad enough. I suppose the confusion we made moving about gave her the former idea? — We must try to clear her mind of them somehow, help her to forget them. The mind is a delicate organism. In her nervous state, Mrs. Bascom, if she broods over some one thing, she might become — well, she might suffer for it, shall we say.'

'That's what I wanted to ask you about. Is it possible all this has upset her so that she'd be perfectly normal about some things and queer about others?' asked Mrs. Bascom.

From the turn the conversation had taken, a scheme had sprung into her mind and she acted upon it at once. If she could deliberately plant the suspicion that the balance of Sylvia's mind was temporarily upset by the strain of her experiences, it might soften the impression she had made about the will as well as prepare for the indefinite fear of the future she had expressed.

'I think I see what you mean, Mrs. Bascom,' answered the doctor, his eyes narrowing speculatively. 'It's quite possible, almost probable. Is there anything definite you can point to that gave you this impression?'

'Woman's intuition, perhaps, more than definite facts,' evaded Mrs. Bascom. 'But I hope I'm wrong.'

'Of course. You must watch her closely, however, and if you find a basis for your fears, let me know at once. It may prove vital in the treatment, you see.'

'I certainly will, Doctor. I'm so glad you are taking charge, will be right here when needed. — You do intend to stay a while yet?'

He replied in the affirmative and switched the conversation to Inspector Sewell, about whose ability he questioned Mrs. Bascom plainly and seriously.

'Oh, Ezra's all right — in his way. This is the first murder he's ever had to handle, but I guess he's capable of it,' she acknowledged.

'You think he is really competent, then? You see, I'm anxious to see something done, to call in a real detective if necessary. Mr. King was my friend and ——'

'And mine,' interrupted Mrs. Bascom. 'That's why I would agree to getting an outside man if I thought it necessary. But I don't — yet. I'm sure Ezra Sewell is doing his best. He's keener than he looks in some ways, and I'd trust him anywhere as far as I was concerned.'

'Thanks for the kind words, Ellen B.,' said the inspector's voice with a chuckle, as he suddenly appeared in the doorway of the room. ''Bout time I interrupted, I figured, as things was gettin' sort of personal.'

'You mean you've been guilty of eavesdropping?' laughed the doctor as Mrs. Bascom sniffed in humiliation that her words should have been overheard. 'Guess I'll have to watch my speech from now on!'

'Yep, you'd better. Inspectors an' such ain't supposed to have no scruples, you know, Doctor. But then, I ain't learned much for my pains' — he turned to Mrs. Bascom with a grin — ''cept Ellen B.'s opinion of me, which is highly flatterin', considerin'!'

She took a step away from him, but Sewell followed her.

'Just a minute, ma'am. There's somethin' I'd kind of like to say to you, if you don't mind — sort of private like,' he added for the benefit of the doctor.

In silence they walked out of the house and down the lawn toward the road, until Sewell suddenly stopped and spoke.

'I'm goin' back to have a little confab with Ruel about now. I was just thinkin' maybe you an' me could talk things over a bit, confidential like.'

'What things?'

'Well, I kind of figured we might compare notes in case I should find you'd thought of somethin' I hadn't, or found somethin' as you'd — er — forgotten to tell me about.' He paused suggestively, but she did not take the hint.

'Whom do you suspect?' she answered evasively.

'Huh. That's a mighty big little question, Ellen B. There's lots of queer notions runnin' round in my head,' he drawled. 'One of 'em perhaps you'd be interested in hearin' an' helpin' me with.

'Say we was wonderin' about some woman. — I'll put it the way you do one of those things you try to prove in geometry. — Given this woman, let's say she was one of the guests, an' a right smart one too. She sort of had her finger in things from the start, talked to lots of 'em, an' had a chance to find things out an' cover up some facts, if she'd happened to want to.

'Well, let's say she did, but little things kind of showed her up. She was so terrible honest, she wouldn't tell a lie, so told things so true it gave her away. Then again, she always knew just where to look for things — clues that were sort of blind an' might be misleadin'. She answered some questions right cute an' ——'

'Ezra Sewell, are you accusing me of — of this murder?' cried Mrs. Bascom sharply.

'Murder — you? Certain not. Whatever put such an idea in your head? I was just talkin' about this "suppose woman," an' I was just sayin', if there had been such a female, how'd you go about it to find out why she did these things an' what they were?'

Mrs. Bascom returned his gaze with snapping eyes and defiantly poised head.

'If I were a man, Ezra Sewell, I'd use what brains the good Lord gave me. Being only a woman, I'd — I'd ——'

Her retort rather failed in letter, though not in spirit. She could think of nothing withering enough, so ended with a click of her teeth that attempted to express her loathing and disgust.

'Well, if you should happen to think of any way, let me know, Ellen B.,' suggested Sewell mildly, as he shuffled down the road.

Not until he had disappeared from sight did Mrs. Bascom allow herself the relief of gasping aloud. — So he suspected her, had warned her — Of what? She was only doing her best to solve the mystery — by concealing vital facts from the law, her conscience added!

She trembled, but her thin shoulders straightened with determination even as she leaned weakly against a tree for support.

CHAPTER IX

GROPING

'You get along home, Pete. An' don't forget to look in on Ruel's pigs an' see that everythin' is all right on his place. Scat, now. I'm too busy to talk.'

Inspector Sewell pushed up his bone-rimmed glasses to their rightful position on his stubby nose. They had been pulled down from his eyes so that he might look over their rims as he addressed his assistant, but the very act of pushing them back into place added a note of finality to his words. Peter shambled away without even the formality of a 'Good-night.'

Ezra Sewell sat in an odd-looking room, known officially as the office to the jail. To study its details was, in a measure, to understand the man himself, for the room held many hints both tangible and intangible as to the character of its master.

Coming upon the jail from the outside, it appeared to be a single-storied, unpretentious brick house, unless it were viewed from the back where curtained windows gave place to barred ones. A single door in the exact middle of the façade opened into the office, large, square, and sunny. This was neither cluttered nor formal in appearance, though it contained a variety of objects, each scrupulously clean and neat, obviously upholding the maxim of 'a place for everything, and everything in its place.'

Hooked rugs in gay colors attracted the eye to the polished floor; a row of pots in the windows added a touch of scarlet geraniums against the white curtains, while a red checkered cloth and rose-painted lamp adorned the table in the center of the room. A Governor Winthrop desk filled one corner, attesting to a shrewd piece of 'trading' on Sewell's part; a safe in the opposite one was decked with a tidy and a shining silver loving-cup bearing the inscription 'To Ezra Sewell in token of ten years' service to the community — From his fellow townsmen and women.' Finally, an armchair, in which no one but its owner ever dared to sit, a homemade bookcase, and four cushion-seated chairs completed the main furnishings of the room.

Facing the outer door was another, now open, which gave a glimpse of a narrow corridor with its three barred cells, while similar doors on the right and left walls opened into a small bedroom and bath and a kitchen, respectively. The remaining space on the walls was incongruously decorated with a lithograph of 'Rock of Ages,' a shotgun, a framed certificate, a pair of handcuffs of antiquated design, a glass case of worsted flowers, and an ormolu clock.

At the desk, Ezra now sat in his shirt-sleeves, biting his pencil and staring at a blank sheet of paper before him. His toes were hooked back around the front legs of his chair, and his blue shirt bulged out from under gaudy pink suspenders as he leaned forward intently. For some time he sat motionless, while the light of the early evening waned. At last, with a long-drawn sigh, he started to write, then threw down his pencil and went to the table, lighted the lamp ceremoniously, and, pushing aside the electric drop light on the desk, set it down at his elbow and resumed his task.

He wrote a heading, followed it with a few brief lines, then read them over aloud.

List of Things to be Investigated

1. Where the weapon is hidden.
2. The motive for the murder. (Note: check up on King's early life somehow.)
3. The meaning of the figures 24578.
4. Who the thief was and what he got.

'But he might have been any one,' a voice from outside the room interrupted the reading. 'How can you expect to find a man who just walked in the window and out again?'

'I think it was some one not so far off, Ruel,' answered Sewell, as if the interruption was not unexpected. 'It wouldn't surprise me none if it had somethin' to do with the murder too, in a way.'

'Why do you think that?'

'Little things. Not a sign of a clue, yet he was scared away sudden; no attempt at real robbery except in that one drawer of the desk where only papers were; the fact it happened just when it did, sort of.'

To a visitor, this exchange of questions and information between a prisoner and his jailer would have seemed strange, to say the least. As a matter of fact, this was not the first time such a conversation had been held. Sewell's wits seemed to be sharpened by talking things over with some one like Ruel and meeting his objections, for he was loquacious both by nature and environment. To Ruel it had been a God-send, for by this means he was able, in spite of his forced confinement, to learn details of progress in the investigation.

'Finally,' continued Sewell. 'Number five is — "What's Ellen B. concealin'?"'

'But surely you don't think she's guilty?'

'Guilty of what? Murder? — No. Hidin' some sort of information or somethin' like that — yes.'

'Why don't you ask her point-blank then?'

'Who, Ellen B.? I guess you don't know her — or wimmen, for that matter, son,' answered Sewell lugubriously. 'Give 'em nothin' to talk about, an' you can't stop 'em; let 'em decide to keep a secret, an' the Lord help you!'

'I take it you don't think much of ——'

'Hold on. I ain't said nothin' against her an' the whole tribe of 'em,' bridled Sewell. 'An' I ain't given up findin' what she knows. There's ways of gettin' around saints an' devils — an' she ain't exactly either.'

Ruel wisely made no comment on this bit of philosophy, so Sewell got to his feet, walked over to the safe and squatted before it. Slowly he twisted the combination, squinting at it and working his jaws. The first time it failed to work, but the second attempt opened the door. He took out a cardboard candy box, carried it to the desk and spread out its contents — a bit of cement, the slip of penciled figures from King's dressing-gown pocket, the typewritten sheet from Sylvia's machine, and the sheaf of papers containing the guests' summaries of what they had seen.

These he eyed thoughtfully, touching one after another with the tip of his finger, then drew a fresh sheet of paper toward him and made a row of nine, carefully spaced circles, tracing them around a small button. In these he put numbers from 2 to 0, then laboriously spread his fingers over certain of these, studying his hand speculatively.

'It's possible — with hers,' he muttered. 'I just been tryin', Ruel, to see if it would come natural like to punch those typewriter figures without thinkin' about it much. Seems like it would, with Sylvia's hands.'

'Of course it was only a coincidence if she says so,' agreed Ruel eagerly. 'I tried that scheme myself on the wall here.'

'Defacin' township property, was you?' chuckled Sewell. 'You'll have to settle up for that.'

'But, Ez, you know she had nothing to do with it. You said yourself she was innocent.'

'So I did, before she was found.'

The bars of the cell rattled furiously and Ruel's voice raised to an angry pitch.

'Ezra Sewell, you listen to me. Sylvia could no more have ——'

'I've heard all that before, son. No more could she be the one to grab for his money on that will business — but she's doin' it. Explain me that first, before you tell me what she couldn't do.'

'But you haven't given her a chance to explain. There must be some reason. She says King told her he was going to make that will.'

'That's just the trouble. He didn't!'

'How do you know? You mean to call her a — a liar?'

'Seems so. Seein' as how King told me that very day he intended leavin' quite a sum of his money to the village an' such, it looks queer. Besides, a blind man could see she was makin' that up. She ain't a good liar.'

The bars rattled again impotently, but Ruel could think of no adequate retort to this statement except a loud groan. It was Sewell who spoke again.

'Now as you'll let me finish what I had a mind to say, I will. I ain't said I don't think she's innocent, an' I ain't said but what I think she's hidin' somethin'. What that is an' why, I aim to find out, that's all, an' I hope it ain't nothin' against her. — Seems to me if only these here women weren't so blame full of hidin' things, we'd get along faster.'

He abruptly swept the papers and clues into the box, thrust it into the safe, and strode into the corridor to stand just outside Ruel's electrically lighted cell, rocking back and forth on his heels as he spoke.

'Son, I may be gettin' old an' all that, but I ain't a fool. Of all them as looks queerest — the most suspected ones — you an' her are the ones I'm most certain are innocent. First off, I know you two. Second, it's just 'cause you can't explain things only by coincidences an' such, that I know what you say is true. I mean to say, it's easier to make up a real good lyin' excuse for somethin' than just a coincidence that may sound queer. If you two had denied things right out, it would be different, but you ain't tried to, see? Leastwise, you ain't on the most important things. As to you, son, it seems like you're the only one I can talk to open an' trust. Don't spoil it, Ruel.

'I know it's hard on you, keepin' you locked up here. You don't have to say nothin' about how you feel toward Sylvia either. It's writ all over you. But you're doin' more good right here, not confusin' things up by messin' in with help, than if you were free. That plain an' hittin' the nail on the head?

'Now, then. You're blamin' me for not gettin' anywhere. Oh, yes, you are, an' maybe you ain't the only one neither. But that ain't the fact. — It won't do no good steppin' on everybody's toes, accusin' before you have proof. An' it does do a whole lot just lettin' every one go unsuspected like. Look at that robbery business. It wouldn't have happened, I'll bet, if whoever done it thought he was suspected, see? But it proved there's still some one about who — well, who ain't to be trusted, puttin' it mild.

'Take each one by turn. The doctor an' the judge. Old friends of King's an' not to be suspected, except they were handy at the murder an' might have been the burglar, of course. Ellen B. an' Sylvia — both actin' queer, hidin' things an' playin' some sort of fancy game. Basil Stacey — well, he's got some things to explain yet. An' you — tied up with circumstantial evidence. You're the goat now, all right, an' it's handy havin' one, even if you know he just butted into things innocent.

'Why, it's just so simple, it's all complicated. I got it all figured out how King was killed, certain sure. One of his guests knew all about the play, an' planned accordin'. In the dark, he slipped out the window back of the guests an' came in the one near the desk. They were all oiled an' the curtains made it easy not to let in any light.

'He hid in the dark till after you was supposed to have killed King, then did it himself, slippin' back as he had come. He probably locked one window after him, an' the other while the folks were messin' around lookin' for clues.

'His motive? That's what we've got to find out, not how he did it in every detail. An' that means findin' who King really was, where he ——'

'Let me out of here, Ez, and I'll trace back his life,' pleaded Ruel.

'How? Visit every city in the country an' Europe lookin' for a man who probably deliberately hid his history? Don't be foolish, son. You just sit tight, an' one of these days we'll have you out of here in a jiffy. Meanwhile, I ain't accusin' any one, but I'm watchin' 'em all, an' if they think I'm a fool — so much the better.'

Ruel nodded, convinced for the time by Sewell's arguments. The latter, having delivered himself of this oration, turned on his heel to walk away, but changed his mind.

'I wonder, Ruel, can I trust you to help me?'

'Just try me, Ez. It's what's driving me crazy, doing nothing.'

'Well, 'tain't exactly doin' much. — If I let you out of that cell, hide you somewheres for a while, you won't try to get away?'

'I swear I won't, Ez.'

'All right.' He unlocked the door and motioned Ruel to follow him into the bedroom. 'Now you set there in the dark right still an' just listen — listen hard, see? I'm about due for some callers an' two pairs of ears is better than one, just in case — There they come now.'

Sewell hurried from the room, leaving the door ajar, and dodged into the corridor where he waited until the outer door opened, then slammed the cell gate shut, switched off the light, and reëntered the office.

'Howdy, Doctor, howdy, Judge. Just closin' up for the night. Glad to welcome you here, unofficial. Set down an' make yourselves to home.'

Ezra closed and locked the door to the cells before taking a chair himself.

'How is the prisoner? Told you anything yet?' asked Judge Brant as he eased himself into Sewell's armchair and crossed his plump hands over the hilly folds of his vest.

Before he replied, Sewell carefully filled and lighted his pipe, seeming intent upon his task, but covertly studying the two men. Both physically and mentally they were direct opposites in type. Judge Brant was the more prepossessing in bulk and appearance, Dr. New the more insignificant in physique, but keener of expression and quicker to make a decision or express an opinion concisely. They were both well dressed, obviously men of means and authority in their respective professions.

The doctor sat erect and alert, smoking a cigar leisurely, and scarcely seeming to move as he did so. The judge puffed on his with avidity, and had an annoyingly nervous habit of opening his eyes wide as if in amazement every few minutes, when there was nothing to cause such an expression.

'No, he's gettin' restless, but he ain't confessed yet,' Sewell answered the latter's question.

'A little psychology, eh? Cage the out-of-doors man for a while and he'll soon weaken. That your theory?' continued the judge approvingly.

'I'm not so sure he's guilty,' interposed the doctor. 'I'm remorseful, in a way, since it was I who first accused him. He seemed so genuinely confused and bewildered that after it was all over his face rather haunted me.'

'Sure, I'd have said he was innocent myself,' answered Sewell, 'but look at the evidence against him.'

'He hasn't refuted that?'

'Not satisfactory, Judge.'

For a time they discussed this chain of circumstantial evidence, Sewell giving Ruel's reasons for the facts but maintaining a skeptical tone, the judge frankly doubting, and Dr. New weighing their remarks mostly in silence. From this they drifted into an argument over various phases of the mystery, the inspector allowing the two men to choose their topics at will, listening, for the most part, and putting in a remark or question only when directly addressed or when the talk began to lag. He gained nothing in new theories or knowledge, the two men being frankly puzzled and without definite suspicions except for Ruel.

At length Sewell took a more active part in the conversation, introducing the matter of the burglary so skillfully that it did not seem to be his doing at all.

'It's puzzling,' Judge Brant responded to his lead. 'It seems to me, after due thought, that the burglar must have been after some definite thing and knew exactly where to look for it. Miss Hawley mentioned papers were kept in that desk, as I recall it. That makes it all the more certain it was some one who knew King and his ways intimately.'

'I don't agree with you there,' said Dr. New, leaning forward intently. 'Your logic seems to me at fault. A desk is a natural place in which to keep papers, while a locked drawer invites investigation. It is one of the first places in which a thief would look. Besides, he stumbled into a chair and knocked it over, thus awakening us. Certainly that would argue for an outsider who was not familiar with the room.'

'Both seem pretty possible to me, gentlemen. But seems like the biggest part is, there's no marks where he could have come in an' gone out, none in the flower-bed outside the window, none in the room. As to the chair, it's easy to hit one in the dark, an' after the confusion in the house any one may have moved it out of its rightful place.'

'I suppose you're right, Inspector, yet, if he was a clever man, could he not have foreseen all this?'

'Maybe, Doctor. But presumin' it was an insider, who would you say it was?'

'I've thought of that, but I don't like the obvious conclusion.'

'What's that?'

'Well, it was neither the Judge nor myself. We each heard the sound, jumped out of bed, and opened our doors almost simultaneously as we struggled into bathrobes. As to Basil, his room was down the hall, and he joined us before we reached the bottom of the stairs. That lets him out. Miss Hawley couldn't have done it and gotten back up the stairs again with her bad ankle. That leaves only ——'

'Ellen Bascom!' cried Sewell incredulously. 'Why, I'd never thought of her — for that.' True the idea had never occurred to him, but now that it had been suggested, it opened up several possibilities quite against his will. 'You say she was in her room an' questioned you when you came up again?'

'Yes, she was standing in her doorway. She didn't seem to be a bit frightened, either,' remarked Judge Brant thoughtfully.

'She wouldn't be,' muttered Sewell. 'How was she dressed?'

'Scantily. Looked like a bed quilt around her shoulders, eh, Judge?'

'Something like that, something bulky clutched around her shoulders.'

Ezra laughed aloud at this picture, but there was relief as well as humor in his tone.

'That settles it. I sort of hated to believe Ellen B. would do such a thing. Now I know it. She wouldn't be kitin' around the house in a nighty, not Ellen B.!' He chuckled again, then stopped abruptly. 'That kind of spoils the rest, too, though.'

'What do you mean — what rest?'

'Judge, you're sure about somebody bein' in your room?'

'Of course. My wallet was on the floor, open, some of the papers half out, others scattered to one side.'

'That all?'

'It was enough.'

'But look here. Maybe it fell to the floor an' they just spilled out.'

'Not with my coat carefully spread over the back of the chair. It's a habit I always have — hanging it that way.'

'Sure you did it as usual that night?'

'Of course. Ask Dr. New. He came in and saw it for himself.'

Thus appealed to, the latter looked thoughtful for a moment before replying.

'Sorry, Judge, I'm afraid I can't agree with you. Now that you mention it, I've quite a vivid recollection that it was hanging by one arm. I wouldn't take an oath on it, but I'm reasonably sure.'

The judge's fat cheeks flushed. 'I — I think you're mistaken, Doctor. I'm very particular about my personal habits and I always hang my coat up at night. I'd gone leisurely to bed and there's no reason why I should not have done as usual.'

'It's no killing matter, after all,' said the doctor, raising his eyebrows slightly at his companion's confusion. 'At that, habits ——'

'But it is kind of important,' broke in Sewell hastily. 'I can see you're a neat man, Judge, an' I noticed that particular. But if you forget this once, it means we're suspectin' some one innocent, see?'

'Oh, I see, of course,' muttered the judge somewhat apologetically. 'I only objected to criticism about my personal habits, because I'm sure that ——'

'Look here, was this chair near the door, between it an' the bed?'

'Yes, it was.'

'Then maybe you knocked off the coat when you hurried past it, eh?'

'That's exactly what happened!' agreed the doctor, nodding to Sewell in appreciation of his adroit explanation.

'Maybe,' said Judge Brant, still rather doubtfully obstinate.

'Then you see we've been tryin' to make out one of the women did it when neither one had a hand in any such thing.'

'One of them? You mean to include Mrs. Bascom?'

'That's what I was thinkin', Doctor, back there a ways when I said I hadn't figured her for thievin' downstairs, but for somethin' else. I knew she didn't, though, when you spoke of her nighty!'

He grinned again and the other two joined in with him.

He had accomplished his purpose; whether rightly or wrongly, for he was not so certain as he strove to appear, he had diverted suspicion from both the women. Incidentally, he had gained an interesting, though irrelevant, view of the two men's characters. Dr. New was evidently a keen observer and a diplomat, whereas Judge Brant was rather methodical and resentful of any personal criticism no matter how trivial.

Soon after this, the clock struck ten, and the men arose to depart.

'Don't hurry, gentlemen, it's only nine-thirty. That clock strikes kind of contrary on the half-hours instead of right. It always has.'

'Why don't you have it fixed, then?'

'Always aim to, but never seem to get there. Besides, I'm used to it,' apologized Sewell, noting their exchange of amused glances.

They delayed a few moments, but soon left. Once they were gone, the inspector called to Ruel and led him back to his cell in silence. When it was locked once more, he faced the young man through the bars, waiting for him to make some comment on what he had overheard.

'I don't see why you wanted me to listen to *that*,' said Ruel disgustedly.

'No? Then I take it you wasn't so interested?'

'Only that it was all another proof of the utter foolishness of suspecting Sylvia for anything.'

'Maybe. Personally, I calculate talkin' is always interestin' an' informin'. Me, now, I learned a lot. Ellen B. ain't involved like I kind of thought she might be, an' that's somethin'. Then the doctor is kind of softenin' toward you while the judge ain't. That's somethin' more. As to the burglar, I kind of got a hunch who it was, if not what he was after. Seems as if all that's worth pretty much to me.'

Ruel stared at him queerly.

'You mean — Basil?'

'Ain't many others I could mean, sir. Think it over, same as I will,' answered Ezra, shuffling away down the corridor.

'But he was King's friend, Ez. Why should he ——'

There was no use addressing the vacant air; Ezra had gone without answering.

Slowly Ruel prepared for bed, twisting and turning the inspector's remarks in his mind, trying to interpret Basil's actions in the light of this new suspicion. He had liked Basil in a general way, had envied him for an assurance and easy manner so contrasting to his own diffidence. They had been casual friends, meeting often at King's house, yet they had never been drawn together closely by any mutual interests, and Ruel had recently begun to resent Basil's attentions to Sylvia, although never with any real foundation.

Like a flame, fed by a spark of suspicion, this resentment grew, even though it had no fuel to feed upon — a fact that only increased its intensity. As he climbed into the narrow cot bed, one thing became more and more sure in his mind. Ezra Sewell's methods were certainly individual, his lazy geniality just a useful blind. Back of it all was a keen brain, and Ruel felt suddenly reassured. He trusted himself and Sylvia implicitly in this man's hands.

CHAPTER X

ESCAPE

Mrs. Bascom was very busy the following morning, yet her activities were somewhat peculiar. She had gone to sleep the previous evening reading another of King's books, awakened quite early, finished the story, then tiptoed down to the library for another volume. This she skimmed through, reading a page here and there only, and completing it before breakfast.

From that time on, she had a book under her arm wherever she went, and only when necessary did she raise her eyes from its printed pages. For the most part she had remained in her room with the door to Sylvia's partly open. In this way she could be of service at a moment's notice if needed, but, more important still, she would be on hand if Basil attempted to make his threatened call. This he had not done, however, and nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

Sylvia, pleading weariness, had decided to remain in bed until noon at least. She had stayed awake, but whenever Mrs. Bascom looked into the room, her expression was thoughtful, as if turning all the energy saved by her languor into mental activity. Mrs. Bascom had not interrupted this mood; in fact, she was sure Sylvia had not even seen her stand in the doorway at all.

The house had been very quiet. The doctor and the judge had gone for a walk, while Basil was content to read and write in the rooms below. This did not surprise Mrs. Bascom, for she knew that he was on his vacation, also that he had expressed a wish to be left alone to loaf about and not feel he must go anywhere or do anything requiring energy; yet she looked in on him more than once during the morning and kept a watchful eye on what he was doing. Thus she knew, when he later on went for the mail, that he was taking along two letters of his own, but they were the ordinary size and bulk.

It was about noon when she finally laid aside her books and nodded silently to some weighty decision she had made. She was replacing the last volume in the bookshelf in the library when Basil returned.

'Caught in the act!' he laughed. 'I've always heard it was the meek and mild pillars of virtue who really support blood and thunder literature, but I'd never suspected it of you. It only goes to show how little we can judge our fellow beings by their faces — in a manner of speakin', as Sewell would say.'

A withering response rose to her lips, but she checked it back and forced herself to smile.

'You would think there was enough mystery about here, even to satisfy me! But I read one of King's stories — and that was my downfall. — Did you stop for the mail?'

'Worse and worse! — I have a letter for you, and I do believe it is in a masculine hand. — Ah, your blush confirms it. Here, let me not delay the happy moment longer.' He turned about with elaborate courtesy after he handed her the note.

She glared at his back for a moment, her lips curling with unconcealed disdain to relieve the resentment she could no longer control, then read the letter quickly. A gleam of satisfaction lighted her eyes as she stuffed it into her dress, forcing herself to speak casually and naturally.

'A business matter — quite successful, too.'

'Sounds serious.' Basil turned about again with a fatuous grin. 'I only hope you haven't been playing the market, Mrs. Bascom? There are widows and ——'

'Widows!' finished Mrs. Bascom emphatically, and the one word neatly closed the subject. 'I think dinner — or lunch, as King always called it — will be ready as soon as you are.'

'Good, I take the hint. I'll be with you in a tick.'

Throughout the meal they talked quite steadily on various subjects, but the one uppermost in their minds had no share in the conversation. Mrs. Bascom asked a good many questions about city life, a subject for which she expressed considerable interest and little knowledge. Basil responded readily enough to her lead, but she rather suspected his answers were not always strictly truthful. Though his manner was deferential and serious, she sensed the lighter mood behind it, so accepted his statements in equal gravity without believing a word of them. That he could be quite charming and entertaining, he proved conclusively, yet she was on her guard to discount all this, repressing a growing dislike for him and his easy duplicity.

Ezra Sewell arrived soon after the meal was concluded. He requested Mrs. Bascom to find out if Miss Hawley felt able to go through the papers in

King's desk and check up on a possible loss. This Sylvia consented to do, insisting she was perfectly rested and anxious to be of assistance. As soon as she had dressed, Sewell himself came up to assist her down the stairs, but she declined his offer, saying it was time she learned to get about alone, become less dependent on others.

Basil joined them in the den where the robbery had taken place, and Mrs. Bascom watched keenly for some interchange of greeting between him and Sylvia, but the latter did not look up or speak as she began to take out the papers from the drawer that had been forced open.

Coming upon a sealed envelope that was not labeled, she reached out for a paper-cutter with which to open it, but there was none on the desk. Sewell interpreted her gesture rightly and put her question into words.

'A paper-knife? It ain't where it usually is, eh?'

Sylvia nodded.

'What kind of thing was it?'

'Why, it was one of Mr. King's favorite keepsakes. It was shaped like a sword — silver blade and cleverly imitated hilt.'

Something had warned Mrs. Bascom at Sewell's first question, so she was able to conceal her emotions at the moment. Undoubtedly it was the knife she had found in the chute — had thought was familiar — knew was the one used to murder King!

'It was always kept on this desk?'

'Always.'

'Hm. — Perhaps the burglar opened the drawer with it, an' took it off with him,' suggested Sewell with apparent indifference. 'But let's see if he took anythin' else, Miss Hawley.'

She continued with her work, a moment later looking up at the inspector.

'There is one bundle of papers missing. They were folded sheets, a package about two inches thick, I should say.'

'You know what was in 'em, what they were about?'

'No, not exactly. I only saw the bundle, folded up in a blank sheet of paper. There were several sheets inside this, and it was something to do with business, I gathered.'

'Then you wouldn't know 'em if you saw 'em again?'

'No. — All I do know is that Mr. King locked them in there late in the afternoon of the — the day he died.'

'But he might have taken 'em out again himself.'

'I doubt it. He was busy with his guests from that time on. I'm sure he did not remove them.'

'An' the thief did, eh?'

She nodded silently, and for the first time gave one fleeting glance at Basil. Mrs. Bascom saw this, interpreted it as half pleading, half defiant, but Basil's expression did not change in response to it.

'Then it seems like another of these here affairs that might have been done this way or that way, for all we know. I'd give fifty cents if I could get hold of somethin' definite an' clear just for once,' grumbled Sewell disconsolately. 'You ain't got anythin' to add, I s'pose, Basil? You knew somethin' about his business affairs. Do you happen to know about this?'

'Not a thing more than Sylvia does,' responded Basil readily. 'He spoke of some business matter he wished to run over with me sometime, but gave no hint as to its purport. He has often talked things over with me — the business end of his writing and all — so I have no idea just what he had on his mind this time.'

'This safe, Miss Hawley, I wonder if the thief broke into that too?'

At this implied question, Sylvia pointed to a panel in the wall and told the inspector how to open it. This he did, revealing the locked door of a wall safe.

'Maybe you'd better open it an' make sure.'

'I can't, Inspector. It was Mr. King's private safe and only he knew the combination.'

'Then I guess we don't need to bother with that now. — Miss Hawley, if you don't mind, I'd kind of like to have a little confab with you alone, just to run over certain things a bit.'

This was a request Mrs. Bascom had both anticipated and tried to avoid. She had fully intended to talk with Sylvia herself, to impress upon her the very real danger of her position. That she had not done so was partly her own fault, partly due to Sylvia's unresponsiveness. Yet Mrs. Bascom had come to fear Sewell's innocent conversations, his apparent simplicity, so she tried to forestall him.

'Ezra Sewell, you know she isn't fit to go through another grilling.'

'Grillin', ma'am? I promise it won't be that — just a friendly chat.'

'Call it what you will, she's upset and ——'

'No, Mrs. Bascom,' interrupted Sylvia. 'I may have been foolish and nervous before, but I'm perfectly fit again now. Besides, I want to clear up things, to talk them over with Inspector Sewell.'

Mrs. Bascom attempted to dissuade her, but Sylvia remained firm, ignoring all hints obdurately, quite as determined on the interview as the inspector himself. Almost literally shoved out of the room, Mrs. Bascom's temper very nearly got the better of her. She even contemplated eavesdropping to further her own knowledge of events and to be able to rush in and interrupt matters if Sylvia became too involved. But before she had decided on a definite plan, Dr. New entered the hall and insisted upon leading her away to another room for a private discussion of Sylvia's physical condition.

'Frankly, Mrs. Bascom, I'm rather troubled about her,' he began, placing the finger-tips of one hand against those of the other and staring at them as he moved his palms backward and forward. 'I do not mean so much her physical as her mental condition.'

'She seemed perfectly rational — if that's the proper word — to me. She's just been going over King's papers with Inspector Sewell and is now talking with him alone.'

'Was anything found to be missing?'

Mrs. Bascom briefly recounted the discovery of the loss of the papers.

'I see. Still I'm not satisfied. Her mind is clear now and her physical reactions seem normal for the moment, yet, when I stepped into her room earlier this morning, she was quite the reverse. Her pulse was racing, her nerves too taut, although she seemed relaxed to the point of enervation. When I talked with her, asked a few simple questions to test her reactions, her answers were disjointed, almost irrelevant at times and contradictory. Finally she became moody, silent, and hostile, to judge from her eyes.'

'But is that exactly abnormal?' countered Mrs. Bascom. She was privately wondering whether this was acting on Sylvia's part, or whether her plan to make the doctor suspicious of the latter's mental balance was not working a little too well. 'You know she's been moody and unlike herself ever since I found her in the chute.'

'You mean, in other words, that because she is a woman she has a right to be changeable?' twitted the doctor. 'Seriously, it is this exaggeration of mood that troubles me, you admit she is different, vacillating from mood to mood. A normal mind has periods of extremes, depressions on the one hand and gayety on the other, but between them come stretches of repose — a sort of middle ground, so to speak. She goes too rapidly from one extreme to the other and does not seem to gain that equilibrium which is natural.'

'True — in a way. I've noticed that myself. But what do you infer from that?'

'Merely, we must watch her more carefully, Mrs. Bascom. Understand me, I am not actually alarmed or predicting any relapse, but this mental state, if allowed to continue, would result in a super-nervous condition that might prove decidedly serious. You have influence with her, you can do much that a man or her physician cannot. Find out what is really troubling her and let me know. Then we can take steps to counteract it.'

It was upon the tip of Mrs. Bascom's tongue to reply that she had already tried and failed, but instead she promised to do all she could. Then the doctor gravely left her.

For a time she sat there, silent and thoughtful, her mind working rapidly. Something must be done, some action must be taken. But what? Ezra Sewell seemed content to let matters drift; that was not her idea of tracing a murderer. She had little as yet to go on, yet she had something which no one else knew about and her ruse for protecting Sylvia had obviously borne fruit.

Her speculations were interrupted when she heard a door open and saw Sewell assisting Sylvia toward her room. The latter was silent and thoughtful, but the inspector talked in a cheerful monologue. Mrs. Bascom followed after them to Sylvia's room, and there stopped Sewell as he was leaving.

'I want to talk with you. Where are you going now?'

'Well, I was goin' down town, Ellen B. 'Course if you ——'

'I'll go with you,' she interrupted quickly, then turned to Sylvia who was sitting silently by the window.

'Did he ask you a lot of questions?'

'A few. We just talked — in general.'

Mrs. Bascom realized she was in an unresponsive mood, so made her comfortable with some cushions and prepared to leave.

'Sylvia, will you promise me to stay here in this room and rest until I return. Will you?'

Sylvia nodded assent rather wearily.

'Ring this bell if you want anything and I'll tell Martha to listen for it. — Now remember, you've promised to stay here.'

'I will, Mrs. B.'

'By the way, I intend to stop in at the jail for a moment or two,' suggested Mrs. Bascom offhandedly. She waited, but Sylvia turned her head away and did not speak. 'I thought you might like to send a message to Ruel or perhaps a note?'

'Tell him I'm sorry, of course,' murmured Sylvia in such a low tone that Mrs. Bascom scarcely made out her words. They were far from what the latter had expected for an answer, but when nothing more was added, she left the room, her face puckered into a frown as soon as she entered the hall.

So Sylvia would not even send a message of cheer to Ruel, much less the sort of intimate message she had expected to carry!

Ezra Sewell sat in his automobile patiently waiting for her. After one glance at her face as she climbed in beside him, he drove rapidly down the road and maintained what for him was a reckless pace until they drew up before her home.

'Well, here we are, Ellen B. Now what you got to say? From the look on your face back there, I don't know whether to expect a revelation or a revolution!'

'My information may prove both, Ezra Sewell,' she answered briefly.

'Information, did you say?'

'I did, even though you may think you're the only one who knows anything about this affair.'

'Wish I was an' did, ma'am. Seems like I ain't an' don't, though.'

'I'm glad you admit it, at least. — However, I came to tell you two things, and here they are. The other day I recalled one little fact I'd almost forgotten. While we were searching for clues after the play, one of the guests, Mrs. Tenney, found a stone or pebble on the floor, but did not mention it in her written summary as it seemed so unimportant. I wrote her when I recalled it. Here is her answer.'

She handed Sewell the letter Basil had delivered to her. He read it slowly aloud:

> My Dear Mrs. Bascom —
>
> Yes, I do remember finding that pebble or piece of cement or whatever it was. As it seemed useless, I threw it out of the window later. Roughly (no pun intended, I assure you), the spot where I found it was on the edge of the rug a few feet from the desk over toward that closed window.
>
> That answers all your questions, I think, though for the life of me I can't see anything to them. I suppose I am not intended to!
>
> Do give my love to that wonderful specimen of a 'constabule' who ——

Ezra read the remainder of the note in silence, chuckling at the innuendos quite frankly.

'Thanks for lettin' me see this — all of it,' he nodded. 'It kind of backs up our suspicions, don't it?'

'The other information,' continued Mrs. Bascom, paying no attention to his remark, 'concerns Mr. King. — Have you ever read any of his books?'

'Sure. Mighty lively an' interestin' fun, too.'

'I have just finished skimming through them all — especially some of the older ones I did not know he had written. I think they are more than merely interesting stories. They tell where he lived before he went to New York.'

'My land!' exclaimed Ezra fervently. 'You don't mean it! Ellen B., if you ain't the cleverest, smartest woman —— But get on, tell me the rest.'

She was flushing faintly for no accountable reason at his compliment, but her words were tart enough. 'It's plain as can be to any person of sense. It was Boston.'

'What was the book you found that in? How are you sure?'

'It was in most all of them.'

'But look here, near as I can remember they were written about different places.'

'Some of them were, of course, but more of them were laid in Boston than any one other city. Besides, I found several, written some years ago, I guess, and they were all about Boston. His characters are invariably New England people too. I guess I've visited my sister in Boston enough to know his descriptions are accurate, and that's why his stories are clear and interesting, because he wrote about places he knew. Another thing. He must have known detectives and criminals and their ways. He shows it in his books.

'I believe, Ezra Sewell, that he himself was a detective working in Boston at one time, and his death was an act of revenge by some crook he had captured. That explains everything.'

She concluded with an emphatic nod. Ezra took off his hat slowly and scratched his head. He had been prepared to accept some shrewd deduction from Mrs. Bascom, but this was a little too intangible, too far-fetched for him.

'Well, now, seems kind of possible, but I dunno as it means as much after all. Sounds kind of like one of his own stories. 'Course I can write down there an' inquire a bit, but ——'

'You ought to go there yourself — do something at once,' snorted Mrs. Bascom, observing the doubt in his face. 'It is certainly worth that effort to find out.'

'Nope, I can't get away just now, Ellen B. Got too much to do here.'

'In other words, you don't believe me.' She made a clicking sound with her teeth that expressed her feelings of scorn for his judgment. 'Very well, then, Ezra, I'll tend to that myself.'

'Goin' down personal, you mean?'

Mrs. Bascom ignored his questions pointedly.

'I want to talk to Ruel, if it's possible. Will you take me there or shall I walk?'

''Course I'll take you to the jail.'

Wisely he let the matter of King's identity drop for the time being. After all, there was a chance that her deductions might prove right, and certainly he must let no such chance escape. He could write officially to make inquiries. But she was piqued, and he felt sure she would do as she had threatened. Ellen B. was tenacious, not easily discouraged, and if she determined to go on such a wild-goose chase personally — well, that was her affair, and between them, they would certainly find out all there was to know.

When they reached the jail, a new thought struck him.

'Did you go for the mail to-day?'

'No, Basil Stacey brought it.'

'Hm. Then you can't say as to who got letters, eh? — Happen to know whether he did any writin' himself, mail anythin' to-day?'

'Yes, two letters.'

'Observin', ain't you? — Well, guess I'll do a sort of errand or two, Ellen B. Take me half an hour, maybe, then I'll come back here for you. That long enough for a call? — Help yourself, ma'am. You'll find the key to his cell hangin' in the office near the door. Go right in an' make yourself to home. Guess he ain't a desperate criminal, so you needn't be scared.'

Chuckling softly, Ezra left his car and watched her quizzically as she disappeared into the jail, before he set off down the street, whistling tunelessly as he scuffed away.

His first errand led to the post-office and general store, where he lounged until the little room emptied of its few leisurely customers, then he went to the mail window and gave the postmistress an order to list all incoming or outgoing mail for any of the people at King's house. Questioning her as to the morning's mail, he received a bit of information that was both interesting and illuminating. Basil Stacey had mailed his two letters, both addressed to his office, and with them two packages of approximate letter size, though much more bulky. These had gone under registered mail to his office also.

Turning this information over in his mind, Sewell next sought out several of his feminine neighbors in the village and shamelessly gossiped with them, in each case leading the subject about until it touched upon Sylvia Hawley, and resulted in a brief character sketch through these women's eyes. Invariably, Sylvia came out with flying colors as a thoroughly likable, sincere, and unselfish woman, irrevocably devoted to Mr. King and his affairs.

It was almost an hour later he returned to the jail, expecting to find Mrs. Bascom either already gone or impatiently waiting with some quite personal remarks in store for him. She was not in the office, and a glance at the hook where the key to Ruel's cell hung proved it was still in place. Grinning to himself, Ezra stepped into the corridor to ask Ruel when she had gone and if she had left any message. But the words froze on his lips.

There in the cell sat Mrs. Bascom, gagged, and tied hand and foot, perched bolt upright on Ruel's cot!

Ruel was gone!

CHAPTER XI

EZRA TURNS THIEF

Ezra Sewell stood stock still, too helpless with surprise to move. Ellen Bascom, a prisoner — Ruel Moore, his rightful prisoner, gone! The obvious conclusion was that Ruel had made this exchange and escaped, yet Ezra was reluctant to accept the obvious. It was not like Ruel to have done such a thing, nor was it consistent with Mrs. Bascom's character to have submitted to the exchange. She might have been overpowered, but again that was scarcely plausible from either's standpoint.

As he stood there holding to the bars in his astonishment and trying to muddle out some explanation, the comedy of it suddenly struck Ezra. A chuckle escaped his lips, became a prelude to a convulsing sputter of laughter. Ellen Bascom in jail! Ellen Bascom, helpless, gagged so that she was even robbed of the power of speech, sitting there bolt upright in a cell, powerless to move, her eyes snapping at his! And even in her captivity, she was so calm, so haughty in her pose, so ridiculously out of place.

His mirth passed as quickly as it had come. His duty and a desire to learn from her own lips what had happened were the chief causes for this, but back of them may have been a guilty feeling at the baneful stare from her eyes, just visible above the gag. Obtaining the key from the office, after a hasty glance both inside and outside the jail to make certain Ruel was nowhere in sight, Ezra unlocked the cell door and hurried to Mrs. Bascom's side, his face now grave and serious.

First he untied the gag, which proved to be Ruel's handkerchief, or rather, one that Ezra had lent his prisoner. But Sewall noted it was quite loosely tied, might easily have been slipped off by the manipulation of her jaws, if she had really tried to free herself. The moment it came undone, Mrs. Bascom spoke, her words and tone sharp with sarcasm.

'Have you quite finished your laughter at a poor, helpless woman? Please don't consider relieving my discomfort for an instant until you have entirely exhausted the humor of your side-splitting joke.'

'Now, now, Ellen B., I apologize right off to you. It wasn't a gentleman's way to be actin', I know, but if you'd only been me an' could see how you ——'

'Thank you, I don't need to *see*. I can *feel* how helpless and uncomfortable I am. — A woman in distress must seem very comical to you, of course.' By this time, Ezra had unbound the rope from her wrists and was stooping to loosen those which shackled her ankles, but she quickly drew her feet back beneath the edge of the bed. 'I prefer to do the rest myself, Ezra Sewell.'

Ezra straightened and turned his face away to conceal the involuntary grin that broke over it. Of course he should never have presumed to touch her ankles!

She sprang to her feet and took a step toward the door, but Ezra stepped in front of her to block the way, and she faltered back as if from contact with him.

"Hold on a bit there, Ellen B. Seems like as if there might be a little explainin' before you go.'

'Oh!' The exclamation, though brief, expressed withering scorn. 'I'd thought that to a keen mind such as yours, the situation would be quite obvious. I beg your pardon for presumin' on your intelligence!'

'No presumin' I'm sure, Ellen B. — I suppose it was Ruel as did this?'

'Not at all! Of course I did it myself — just to amuse you. It was such a good joke, so easy to tie myself all up, lock myself in, and hang up the key outside!'

'But why did he do it?' asked Sewell, quite oblivious to her ridicule.

'Because I asked him to, naturally. He was so nice about it, too.'

'Come, Ellen B., this ain't no time for jokin'.'

'No? I guess I must be dense. I'd thought you — er ——' She paused as their eyes met for an instant. There was an unspoken command in his that suddenly made her flush and stammer. This only increased her ire, yet somehow it checked the remainder of the retort that came to her lips.

'A prisoner has escaped,' continued Sewell pointedly, 'an' it's my business to find out how an' why, ma'am.'

The very mildness of his tone warned her that he was in earnest, and she began to speak rapidly to cover up her confusion.

'I came here as soon as you left me, found the key, and entered this cell. Ruel appeared glad to see some one really interested in his welfare and innocence. I sat down on the cot, he stood before me, and we were talking when ——'

'About what, ma'am?'

'Nothing special — Sylvia, and the mystery in general.'

'You was deliverin' a message from her to him, maybe?'

'No. She sent none, though I asked her ——' Mrs. Bascom stopped in confusion, and glanced sharply at Sewell as she interrupted her thought. 'Suddenly he made a break for the door that I had left ajar, and closed me in. It seemed to be a spring lock or something. Then he returned, let himself in again, and bound and gagged me as you saw. He'd gotten the rope from outside somewhere. After he'd locked the door again, he hung up the key and went away.'

'Without explainin'?'

She shook her head in the negative.

'How long ago was that?'

'Thirty or forty minutes, I should say. We talked only a very short time before this happened.'

'Hm. There wasn't nothin' you said as might have given him reason to do this?'

She bridled instantly, recovering some of her former asperity. 'Are you accusing me of urging him to do this, Ezra Sewell, of asking him to tie me up?'

'I'm askin', not accusin', Ellen B.'

'Then I'll answer you that I'm not a medium with powers of seeing into other people's minds, even though I can read yours. I'm sure I never stopped to analyze my words or what he thought in his mind about them.'

'I can believe you there, Ellen B.,' nodded Sewell enigmatically, but if her words were intended as an evasion, he either overlooked or deliberately let them pass unchallenged. A slight relaxing of her tenseness did not escape his keen eyes, however, as he abruptly changed the subject. 'Hope he didn't tie you up too tight? Them ropes didn't hurt, did they?'

His solicitude was disarming and, in spite of herself, Mrs. Bascom thawed perceptibly. Ezra asked her a few other inconsequential questions, then pushed open the door and followed her out into the office, concealing his own emotions at this latest development.

'Can I drive you somewheres, Ellen B.?' he asked as they came to the outer door.

'No, thank you. I'm going to my house for a little, then back to Mr. King's. I don't know just how long it will take me, and I need the exercise, anyway, so I'll walk. — I — I hope you won't hold this against Ruel. I think he was sort of distracted and impatient over his confinement. I'm sure he meant no wrong — to any one.'

'Oh, that end of it's all right. But when a prisoner escapes, it's kind of serious business, you see.'

'Not if it's a secret — if no one knows about it, Ezra.' Her eyes met his squarely, and this time he perceived their message at once.

'Perhaps not,' he nodded slowly. 'Anyways, as long as no one knows except us two, we won't do anythin' serious about it — yet. Of course, his escapin' is bad, a felony in itself. But if he was proved innocent of murder, I guess the judge would pardon that, Ellen B.'

Mrs. Bascom smiled quite genuinely in her relief, then turned and hurried down the street. Inspector Sewell stood in the doorway watching her until she had disappeared around a curve in the road.

'Smart woman — slick as a whistle,' he muttered to himself as he reëntered the office and, walking over to the desk, sat down to think.

Now that he was alone, he arrived at a definite conclusion almost instantly. It was not because Ezra Sewell was mentally slow that he had not reasoned this out before. There were two very distinct causes for his delinquency; one, that he had been too interested in Mrs. Bascom and her retorts to consider seriously the reason for Ruel's act, the second, that he could not help but admire her spirit and the ease with which she evaded questions she did not care to answer, yet never told a positive falsehood. Nor had he tried to force answers from her by reiterating such questions. He knew by experience the futility of such a course, appreciated the value of a more indirect method of securing the truth.

With her departure, however, everything seemed perfectly clear and obvious with scarcely a thought.

'Pretty clever, but just a little too much so to fool me,' he said aloud, unconsciously addressing his words toward the cell where Ruel had formerly shared his oral musings. 'Guess it happened about this way. Ellen B. didn't think I paid enough attention to her bright idea about goin' to Boston to look up King's past, so darned if she didn't persuade Ruel to go for her — just like that! Not that it'll do any harm, as far as I can see. Guess it'll be better for him than stayin' cooped up here as long as folks still think he's a prisoner.

'Well, now, let's see. She has him lock her in an' tie her up just to make it look natural an' fool me. But there's where she laid it on a bit thick, seems to me. It wasn't necessary at all, at all. An' naturally he tied her up gentle, too, so all that talk was — well, actin' — all except her bein' mad at me for laughin' an' her bein' willin' to keep it all a secret.'

Ezra slapped his knee and chuckled again at the picture his memory recalled. Then his eyes fell upon a folded slip of paper, tucked beneath the ink bottle. It proved to be a note, without address or signature. But neither was necessary as he read the hurried scrawl in Ruel's handwriting:

> I promised not to break away from *you*, but not any one else. Don't worry, I won't disgrace you, and will keep out of sight. Will call on you the moment I return.

'Yep, when he returns — from Boston. So that's that, all neat an' tidy. — But that Ellen critter. 'Tain't good for her to think she's foolin' me completely. 'Tain't good for any woman, least of all her. Guess I'd better just drop by her house an' kind of let her know by a hint like.'

He carefully locked the outer door of the jail so that no one could enter and discover Ruel's absence, and the very resistance of the lock attested to the fact that this precaution had not been taken for months or years. Then he set off down the road at a comfortable amble.

It was not far to Mrs. Bascom's house, spick and span in its recent coat of white paint, set off by trellised crimson rambler vines and shaded by a tall elm that dwarfed as well as protected it. The pathway to the front door cut through velvety grass and lanes of flowers, here and there speckled with early blossoms, but mostly green with promise of later blooms.

The shades were all pulled down to the window sills to keep out the hot sun, but the door stood wide open. Ezra stepped inside, pulling off his somewhat battered felt hat and twirling it on his fingers, as he glanced at the closed doors on the lower floor, then up the stairs into their cool darkness. Not a sound came from anywhere in the house. He put a foot on the stairs to ascend, then drew back.

'Nope. She might be dressin' or somethin',' he muttered, then raised his voice in a lusty shout. 'Ellen B., oh, Ellen B.'

Immediately there was a crash like the hasty closing of a box or trunk, followed by a scurry of footsteps. Ezra listened as they descended from the attic and brought Mrs. Bascom to the head of the stairs. She was flushed, excited, and startled.

'My land, you scared me!' she explained needlessly. 'I — I was just seein' to something up there and ——' She stopped abruptly to recover her breath. 'Well, what do you want now, Ezra Sewell?'

'Me? Nothin',' he drawled, but he wondered why she seemed to look almost guilty. Could it be that Ruel was hiding here, waiting for a chance to slip away? It would be easy to find out. 'I just happened along to ask you if you was ready to go back. Thought I'd drive you up.'

The flush slowly seeped from her face, though she still eyed him with suspicion as she descended the stairs.

'Yes, I'm ready now, and I'd be glad for a lift after all.'

'Then I'll go get the car, shall I?'

'Don't bother. I'll go with you.'

Was it only imagination or was she now quite anxious to get him away from her house? He waited while she locked the door, then slipped the key under the mat quite casually. That rather settled his suspicions that Ruel was in the house. Such being the case, why was she so perturbed?

Before he could answer his own query, Mrs. Bascom briskly led the way to the street and turned in the direction of the jail.

The ride back to King's house was made in silence as far as conversation was concerned — a silence enforced by the clatter of the ancient automobile. But when they arrived in a little swirl of dust, Ezra shut off the engine and faced his passenger quizzically before she could get out.

'I've been thinkin', Ellen B. About that idea of yours of trailin' Mr. King. Guess there might be somethin' to it after all.'

'I'm sure there is, but you needn't bother about it. I'll tend to it in my own way as I said I would.'

'Then it won't be necessary for me to make the trip, eh? 'Course you'll tell me what you find out?'

'Certainly.'

'An' you'll keep it a secret, about what happened this afternoon — Ruel an' all?'

'I've already said I would,' she answered as she descended to the road. 'I'm not likely to boast about it. I should think that would be obvious — even to you!'

'That's fine, an' I hope he learns somethin' too.'

Mrs. Bascom turned so suddenly she had to steady herself against the automobile.

'He? What do you mean?' she questioned with an unsuccessful attempt to sound innocently bewildered.

The self-starter chugged loudly, caught, and the engine roared with staccato explosions. Just before he threw in the clutch, however, Ezra smiled down at her and called above the noise, 'Tell him I'll always have a room an' bed waitin' for him — when he gets back!' Then, with a leap, the car sprang forward with Ezra grinning to himself at the consternation on her face.

'Maybe that'll give her somethin' to think about, eh, my friend?' he asked a jay that eyed him saucily from a tree by the side of the road.

As he drove toward the village, the automobile went slower and slower, accommodating its pace to his thoughts. Some of the events of the day had cleared of themselves, but others were still puzzling. He could not forget that look of startled guilt on Mrs. Bascom's face as she confronted him from the top of the stairs. For that matter she had been acting queerly ever since King's death. What could be the reason? Did she know more than she had told? Obviously she did. But was that knowledge guilty or ——

There seemed no logical alternative, yet he refused to accept the inevitable conclusion. It was utterly impossible to suspect Ellen Bascom of guilt. On the other hand, it was equally impossible to believe Sylvia or Ruel was guilty, yet facts, circumstantial evidence, everything seemed against them.

His musing was interrupted by his arrival at the jail, but was automatically resumed as he prepared to cook himself a hasty supper. Again the mood was shaken off while he ate whole-heartedly, only to return, once this ceremony had been performed and the dishes neatly washed and put in their respective places.

'A trunk. Now what would she be doin' with a trunk?'

He jammed tobacco into his pipe so emphatically that it would not draw. This necessitated cleaning it out again, refilling it, then neatly brushing up the tobacco he had spilled in the process and hoarding it back into the can. Darkness had fallen, but he made no move to light the lamp on the table. He tilted back his chair and rocked on it as he smoked and muttered aloud.

'Say it was puttin' somethin' away, now. — Don't seem logical. She didn't have anythin' with her an' she'd already been away at King's a couple of days. Trust Ellen B. to have done her tidyin' before that. — Well, then, say she was takin' somethin' out. — But she didn't bring anythin' down as I could see.

'Then she was lookin' at somethin' that was already put away there. That's the truth. Perhaps it was somethin' she'd put there just recent ——'

His chair came to the floor with a thump and he remained immovable for a full minute.

'She was concealin' somethin' in her bosom that day, an' she was kind of guilty about it. Now to-day she was guilty-lookin' again at bein' found in her own attic. — Ezra Sewell, if you ain't on the right track, you ain't no weather prophet!'

With this rather mixed remark, he again relapsed into silence. It was broken only once by another disjointed bit of philosophy. 'Women are peculiar, but usually they have reasons for things an' the doin' of 'em.'

It was quite dark when Ezra got to his feet, fumbled about in the familiar room until he found a flashlight, tested it, then went out, locking the door again behind him. Apparently bent on an aimless walk, he followed the street down to the edge of the village, then cut off into a field that ended in a pine grove. Into this he disappeared.

Fifteen minutes later he had circled around and was approaching Mrs. Bascom's house from the rear, taking care to keep in the shadows as much as possible. Gaining the doorway, the elm tree effectually darkened the house so that no one would have seen him there — had any one been about so late at night! His groping fingers found the key under the mat, and with it he unlocked the door. Once inside, Ezra turned the key in the lock and breathed easier.

'Nice way for an officer of the law to be sneakin' around, but all's fair in love an' detectivin',' he mused, directing his flashlight on the stairs up which he mounted on tiptoe with unconsciously exaggerated caution.

He did not pause at the second floor, but continued up the short, boxed-in flight to the attic. Here he flashed the rays of the light about the room before advancing. It was a single large room, covering the whole area of the house, its ceiling formed by the gabled roof, high in the middle and sloping sharply down to meet the floor at the sides. Pushed into these narrow spaces were two neat rows of trunks, boxes, and bundles, the latter carefully labeled.

'It was a trunk lid she slammed, that's certain.'

He advanced to the first trunk and lifted its lid. A whiff of moth balls assailed his nostrils, and the light revealed the smooth surface of some blankets. The next one seemed full of newspaper bundles, carefully tied with string. Their odor was of lavender. But when he opened a third, the hand that held the light trembled for a moment. There on top of a paper wrapped bundle lay a wisp of white cloth, partially concealing a knife or dagger, its point stained an ominous brown!

Ezra Sewell goggled at it for a moment in astonished silence, holding his breath. Then, with a low whistle, he bent his light down, moving it closer until it almost touched the knife. The cloth had a sort of bow in one end. It was obviously part of a woman's dress — but not Ellen Bascom's. The thought, as it flitted through his head, seemed to bring a peculiar relief. — No, it was more like a younger woman's fancy, such as Sylvia ——

His fingers slipped off the battery button and he was plunged into darkness, but he scarcely noticed that as his mind whirled incredulously. Then he switched on the light again, wrapped the cloth carefully about the knife and placed it gently in his breast-pocket. This done, he closed the lid and stole down the stairs. Unlocking the door, he opened it a crack, listened, then slipped out. A moment later he had replaced the key under the mat and was sauntering down the street as if nothing more startling than an evening's stroll had been occupying his mind.

Once inside the jail, however, his lassitude changed to briskness. The door shut and locked, the shades drawn tight, he lighted the lamp and set it upon the desk. Then he withdrew the knife from his pocket, unwrapped the cloth and studied them both carefully.

The knife seemed almost familiar. — Yes, it was the paper-cutter from Mr. King's desk — the one Sylvia had reported missing. The stains were undoubtedly clots of blood — King's blood. But there were no finger-marks anywhere on it. — Then the murderer had worn gloves, presumably. It all corroborated his theory of a carefully planned, premeditated murder.

Disconnected ideas and conjectures chased through his brain.

How and where had Mrs. Bascom found it? It must have been the morning she discovered Sylvia in the grain chute. Of course it was what she had concealed in her dress. Then obviously she had found it just before or after Sylvia's rescue. — The bit of cloth, stained and cut, was it a clue or had it been used merely as a convenient wrapper for the weapon? — Both. It was dirty from the dust of the chute and must have been torn from Sylvia's dress after she was taken out. — That was it, the knife had been in the chute with Sylvia! And that explained why Mrs. Bascom had concealed it — because she feared it would implicate Sylvia.

Sylvia's peculiar actions, her insistence upon probating the will, her strangely cold, withdrawn manner. Was she implicated, then? Did she know about this knife, or —— No! She need not have pointed out its loss. Besides, her face, her tense, frightened look, her subtly pleading eyes as her lips calmly insisted upon the terms of the will that seemed the one touch of avarice and greed — surely these were not the actions of a murderer. She was doing it all for some purpose — acting a part. But what purpose?

Basil, who had mailed two packages suspiciously like those stolen from the dead man's desk — or were they stolen? Sylvia had said so, yet she might be in league with him, might be shielding him — Again, no. It was not consistent with her character. Her character? Certainly that too was inconsistent ——

Abruptly Ezra Sewell stood on his feet, bundled the knife into the cloth, and put it away in the safe. Then he began to pace the floor, even going into the corridor to stand before the empty cell, staring at it as if to hear some answer to his silent queries from Ruel.

It was midnight when he again reseated himself at the desk and calmly began to speak aloud, addressing his absent prisoner.

'It don't change things a mite after all, Ruel. It helps, in a way, but still we don't seem to get hold of much of anythin' certain. Now here's what we know.

'Man — or woman — he was one of the guests that night an' knew all about the plans beforehand.

While it was dark, he sneaked out one window an' into the other, killed King, then hid the knife an' covered his tracks in the confusion. My guess would be reasonable he dropped it down that chute an' didn't get a chance to get it again.

'That seems clear logical, but it don't decide who the man was or why he did it, eh, son? — Well, that's what I'm after, only darned if I see how I'm goin' to get there. It ain't no use accusin' any one, but I've got to do somethin' mighty quick. There's too much hidin' an' queer business to suit me. Guess, Ez, you'll have to do some mighty direct questionin' one of these days. — Anyway, I hope you find somethin', boy, even if it does look like a wild-goose chase.'

This speech relieved Ezra's mind somewhat, for within fifteen minutes he was comfortably in bed and snoring wheezily.

CHAPTER XII

'IT'S GONE!'

When Ezra Sewell drove off in his car, Mrs. Bascom was so astounded by his remarks that she could not think of a retort until he was out of sight, and by that time more serious matters were clamoring for consideration in her mind.

Of course he had guessed her scheme in sending Ruel off to Boston — how, did not matter much — and Ezra's words implied he would not attempt to interfere with this escape. Yet this was not enough to satisfy her. Woman-like she tried to probe further, to reason out why he had not objected to Ruel's release, what his attitude toward her would be, and whether, after all, her somewhat impulsive scheme, had been the best possible one to accomplish her ends. Ruel Moore was methodical and dependable rather than quick-witted or imaginative; yet he had been keen to perceive her meaning in the hurried instructions she had given him. Did that prophesy he would be equally clever at unraveling the mystery upon which he had been sent? She fervently hoped so, not only for the purpose of clarifying King's past life and catching the murderer, but also to vindicate her own judgment — though this latter reason she did not fully accredit at the time.

Behind this was another startling fact. Ezra Sewell was not easily hoodwinked, it seemed. This was the second time he had made veiled remarks to her, such as his observations on the bulge in her waist when she was carrying the knife concealed there. Did that signify he knew a lot more than he had revealed, that perhaps he had not been so inactive as he appeared? Knowing him, she was inclined to believe so, yet he could not possibly understand even as much of the tangle as she did.

Pondering and speculating, Mrs. Bascom shook the dust out of her skirt with her habitual care, straightened a coil of hair that had been jolted loose during the ride, and resolutely closed her mind to these tantalizing speculations, as she turned toward the house. At least she now had a means of finding out whether Sylvia was deeply interested in Ruel or not. She, Mrs. Bascom, had presumed so until Sylvia refused to send any message of encouragement to him, but she was not altogether sure this should be taken as conclusive one way or another. She had no reason for this feeling, but intuition warned her not to make a too hasty decision.

Before mounting the stairs to Sylvia's room, Mrs. Bascom proceeded to the kitchen to ask a question of Martha Dobson, whom she found just withdrawing two delicately browned loaves of bread from the oven.

'Back again, Martha,' she said with an appreciative sniff at the baking. 'Everything serene? Miss Hawley comfortable?'

'Comfortable? I presume so,' answered Martha, rather shortly with a toss of her head that invited further questioning.

'Then she hasn't called for you, I take it?'

'That she hasn't — not for *me*, Ellen Bascom!'

'What do you mean?' inquired the latter, surprised at her emphasis.

'Exactly what I said. She's had no need of me, though that hasn't prevented her calling for a certain other person as I might mention.'

'The doctor? She's been sick again?'

'Sick? Hump. Hardly! Not when she's been a carryin' on fit to kill with that Stacey man — as I never could abide.'

'Basil Stacey?' cried Mrs. Bascom incredulously. 'Carrying on? Where? How?'

'It was scandalous, I'd say. — An' she, supposed to be sick an' upset over Mr. King's death, settin' there laughin' an' talkin' just as if nothin' had happened. An' with him at it too, visitin' her right there in her bedroom!'

Martha paused dramatically, her flour-powdered arms indignantly akimbo, a picture of outraged dignity.

'In her room? Talking and — and laughing, you said? But you must be mistaken. Sylvia promised ——' She faltered, recalling that Sylvia had only promised not to leave her room. 'Why didn't you stop him, forbid him to ——'

'Forbid him, is it? As if I didn't try to, an' he pushin' me aside with a laugh, while she tells me to go away an' leave them alone! It only goes to show what them city folks is really like. An' I'd always thought she was different.' Martha sniffed and walked away into the pantry.

Mrs. Bascom literally ran after her.

'Martha Dobson, you tell me just what happened. I've got to know.'

'You will, quick enough.' Martha wiped away a tear which might have been of anger, but which was more likely of personal shame and humility at Sylvia's treatment of her. 'It wasn't ten minutes after you left, I was goin' up to see if she wanted anythin'. This man was walkin' up just ahead of me an' she calls out to ask if it was him. He answers it was, an' started straight for her door, so I sidled ahead of him to keep him out. But there he stands, lookin' hard at her, while she, in one of them fetchin' wrapper things that makes her look like a girl almost, sat smilin' an' sayin', "Come right in, Basil, I want to have a talk with you."

'At that I spoke up, tried to get in ahead of him to close the door an' bring her to her senses. An' what does he do but push me away with some silly joke she laughs at! I was that taken aback, before I could move or speak again, he'd actually closed it in my face.

'With that I pushed it open again an' started givin' him a piece of my mind good an' plain, but she frowned, stood up an' ordered me — ordered me out of the room! Flabbergasted, I was. I didn't know what I was doin' until I found myself outside in the hall again, an' heard him lockin' the door on me!'

'Locked the door — with Sylvia ——' Mrs. Bascom's eyes widened with horror, and she turned as if to hurry away from some utterly unbelievable gossip.

'Oh, he's gone again now, never fear,' said Martha quickly, mistaking her movement as a determination to go upstairs and interfere herself. 'But if you could have heard them, laughin' an' talkin' as I did, Ellen Bascom, you'd ——'

'Then you — you listened?'

'Yes, I did, an' I'd do it again without no pricks of conscience,' Martha justified herself stoutly.

'Of course. It was your duty. But what were they saying?'

'I couldn't hear very well, especially at first, they talked so quiet an' serious like, he a-holdin' her hand an' bendin' close to her.'

'But the other room — why didn't you go in there by that door?' questioned Mrs. Bascom, unaware that she might be revealing more than she intended by this knowledge of a better listening post.

'I did, but it was shut tight an' I was afraid if I opened it, he'd come an' lock it too. Well, after a bit, this Stacey let go her hand an' drew up a chair. I was a-lookin' through the keyhole, you see. An' then they just began laughin' an' smilin' away at each other as if — as if he was her best friend,' Martha finished lamely, suppressing a stronger phrase that obviously rose to her lips.

'How long did you stay there?'

'Till he went — more than half an hour later, an' me so stiff with kneelin' there my legs almost cracked. He walked straight out of the house an' hasn't been back since, so I came down here without a word to her. An' that's all I know, though it's more than enough, I'd say to any one as asked me.'

The two women stared silently at each other, each picturing that scene which Martha had just described. At last Mrs. Bascom spoke in a low, hurried voice.

'You did exactly right, Martha, both in listening and telling me. It — it must be as the doctor feared — her mind is affected.'

'Did he say that? You mean she might not know — might not realize what she was doin'?' whispered Martha, eager to accept any plausible explanation of Sylvia's rebuffs.

Mrs. Bascom nodded slowly, though she was far from certain this was the whole truth.

'I think we'd better keep this to ourselves, not tell any one, don't you?' she suggested.

'I won't tell a soul. — An' I hope it's so, that her mind is —— I mean, it would be terrible, only it seems as if it was the best thing to happen —— Oh, I'm that upset an' confused I don't know what I'm sayin'.'

Tears trickled down her kindly, wrinkled face and for a moment Mrs. Bascom soothed her like a child, then hurried away down the hall. But her steps retarded as she mounted the stairs, paused on the landing part-way up to adjust her mind to this new complication.

Considered of itself, this meeting between Sylvia and Basil would have appeared as unaccountable as it had to Martha, yet for all its strangeness, Mrs. Bascom sensed certain things in view of the previous conversation she had overheard between them. That their serious talk had been concerned with the matter of the stolen papers and Basil's subsequent threat, Mrs. Bascom had not a doubt, and that they had arrived at some amicable agreement was quite clear from the laughter and talk that had followed. Yet how could they have agreed, arranged a plan between them? Basil held the upper hand, was not likely to have receded from it. Had he merely extended the time limit of his threat? Improbable, for in that instance, Sylvia would still have been perturbed, scarcely free to laugh.

Then there was only one other assumption possible — that Sylvia had given in to him. Incredible — impossible! Surely she was in love with Ruel. It seemed obvious — their actions previous to King's death, their being together so much. And yet Sylvia was so strange, had seemed to ignore Ruel's imprisonment.

There was a way of finding out the answers to some of these speculations, and Mrs. Bascom hesitated no longer to take it. But her determination suffered a temporary setback when she arrived at Sylvia's room. Peering through the door that stood ajar, she saw Sylvia was fast asleep in her chair, so Mrs. Bascom postponed her questioning, entered on tiptoe and stood at her side, studying her face in an attempt at cool impartiality which broke down almost immediately.

There is something disarmingly frank and innocent about the face of a sleeper. The closing of the eyes at once takes away the animation and subtlety which give depth to the expression, while the relaxing of the muscles in sleep robs a face of any artificiality or pose, moulds it into those characteristic lines which may be controlled or repressed during consciousness. So with Sylvia's quiet face, there was only a pathetic droop to her bowed lips and an appealing youthfulness that demanded sympathy, not condemnation. It could never be the face of a murderer or a cold-blooded plotter, Mrs. Bascom decided again, her sympathies swallowing up her resentment of a few moments ago.

Retiring to her own room, she freshened up for dinner, then sat by the window calmly reviewing the facts as she knew them, until her watch pointed to six-thirty. A glance in at Sylvia's room disclosed she was just awakening, so Mrs. Bascom entered and cheerfully asked what she would like to eat. Sylvia returned her smile quite naturally for an instant, then abruptly sighed and seemed to withdraw within herself once more.

'Don't bother, Mrs. B. I shall hobble down as soon as I slip on a dress,' she said with forced briskness.

'You'd much better stay up here, Sylvia dear. It's no bother at all to bring you a tray.'

'Thank you, no. I'm not an invalid any longer. Besides, I — I want to be with people and listen to conversation again instead of being all alone.'

Mrs. Bascom realized it was useless to argue, so returned to her room and puttered about for a few minutes until Sylvia should be ready, intending to assist her down the stairs. Her offer, however, was stoutly declined.

'I can manage quite well, Mrs. B., if I just go slowly. You've all been babying me too much lately, and it's time to call a halt.'

The others had already assembled when the two women arrived in the lower hall and Basil came forward immediately, linking his arm through Sylvia's and supporting her weight quite easily. Mrs. Bascom noticed that Sylvia did not refuse his help nor draw away from him.

The meal proved to be rather a labored one as far as conversation was concerned. Judge Brant and Dr. New were somewhat weary and uncommunicative, replying only when directly addressed. The doctor, moreover, seemed to be watching Sylvia closely, obviously surprised and interested by her attitude toward Basil. These two were talking and laughing together, rather ignoring the others. Their conversation was light and aimless, Basil exerting himself to the utmost to entertain her, Sylvia encouraging him, though at times her animation grew forced, her interest merely a veneer.

Following Mr. King's custom, the two women left the men to their smoking after the meal, but Sylvia decided not to go to her room yet, insisting she wanted to check over all the papers in the desk before retiring. Mrs. Bascom accompanied her to the den and sat down to read the local news while Sylvia worked. An hour passed in which Mrs. Bascom did little reading, but Sylvia worked in absorbed silence, sorting the papers, taking notes, and making calculations.

At last Mrs. Bascom put aside the newspaper and, making an excuse of going to her room for something, ascended the stairs, her mind made up to write down and arrange a résumé of the details and discoveries she had made in an effort to clarify matters.

She had moved quite silently and as her hand was stretched out to touch the doorknob of her room, she abruptly became rigid, listening to a faint sound from within. Somebody was in there, had just opened one of the bureau drawers!

Cautiously she pushed on the door, which was unlatched, until she could peer in, regardless of the fact that she might be discovered.

Against the dim outline of the window was silhouetted a man's figure, stooping over the bureau. As she watched, he switched on a flashlight, holding it inside the drawer so as to concentrate its rays, and began to poke an inquiring finger among the neatly folded garments which it contained. The reflected light was not bright enough for her to make out the man's features, but he seemed to be of large frame, and his fingers were short and thick — like those of Judge Brant!

Unsuccessful in his search, he treated the other drawers in the same manner, entered the closet, even rifled her suit-case. When he turned off his light after this, Mrs. Bascom realized he must come out into the hall in another moment, so stepped aside from the door, waiting to challenge him when he opened it.

Footsteps crossed the room, stopped, then continued, but toward the communicating door to Sylvia's room! Mrs. Bascom waited until they had passed over the threshold, then, without hesitation, dodged into her room and continued her spying.

The same procedure was followed in Sylvia's room. Each drawer was searched, but apparently without result. The closet yielded nothing. Then the figure turned to the writing-table and the light flashed on and off as it was scrutinized. Suddenly the man sighed or whistled in a low tone and, before she realized what he was doing, swiftly crossed the room to the hall door and disappeared.

Mrs. Bascom scurried to her own door, opening it just in time to see him enter a room farther down the hall. It was Judge Brant's room!

She thought rapidly. She must make certain who this man was. On the other hand, if it should prove to be the judge himself, she must have some ready excuse for knocking on his door as she did not intend to accuse him or reveal her knowledge of his prowling yet — not until she could think out some reason for it.

She was saved all this, however, for at that moment the doctor's voice from below called the judge lustily. Drawing back, Mrs. Bascom saw the door open and the judge himself hurry out and down the stairs. As soon as he had disappeared, she went to his room and knocked. There was no answer. She opened the door and boldly turned on the light, but as she had expected, the room was empty. On the bureau lay a flashlight!

Then it was the judge, beyond a doubt. But why had he searched the two rooms? What was he after?

Mrs. Bascom returned to her room and sat down to ponder these two questions. Fear gripped her, a weakness that robbed her of all her self-assurance at one sweep. She had felt quite capable of playing the detective until now, had rather gloated over the knowledge she was concealing from Ezra Sewell. Yet nothing seemed to clarify under her handling, everything was becoming more confused and complex. Every one seemed to be acting queerly, unnaturally, concealing some act guiltily — Sylvia, Basil, and now Judge Brant. Would it be Dr. New next? — The thought sent an unaccountable chill down her spine.

Footsteps began to ascend the stairs slowly. She jumped to her feet, her heart racing. Some one was approaching stealthily, testing each step before placing his weight upon it. She shrank back with eyes fixed upon the door, expecting to see it slowly open. Step by step, softly, the person mounted, reached the top, then ——

Mrs. Bascom shivered and tried to laugh as her body relaxed so suddenly that she would have fallen if she had not caught the footboard of the bed. It was only Sylvia, limping and slow! — Strength raced back into her body and with it a new determination to finish what she had set about to do; namely, confront Sylvia with some, if not all, of the facts she knew.

Mrs. Bascom smiled grimly to herself, thinking of her foolish fears of a moment ago. — Confess defeat so easily, run to Ezra Sewell with her tale — and probably have him scoff at it as all imagination —— No, not she! Without waiting to knock, she walked into Sylvia's room, resolved not to leave it again until certain pertinent questions had been asked and answered.

'You've finished your work over the papers? Nothing new discovered, I suppose?'

'No. There were some things to be acted upon at once. I sorted them out and will attend to them to-morrow,' murmured Sylvia abstractedly. 'There's so much to be done. I'm glad — it will keep me busy, help me not to think.' She spoke in such a low tone that her words were scarcely audible, but Mrs. Bascom did not miss them.

'Exactly. And now that you've recovered so nicely, Sylvia, I think it's time we had a good talk over matters. While you were still ill from the shock, you said such unaccountable things that ——'

'But I have nothing to retract,' interrupted Sylvia, a note of weariness in her voice. 'Please let's not discuss that now, Mrs. B. I'm so tired of it all.'

'Not too tired to work — or chatter like a magpie with Basil!'

Mrs. Bascom's shot went home. Sylvia winced and dropped her eyes, a slow flush gathering in her cheeks. She clenched and unclenched her fingers nervously; her lips opened to respond, then closed again with a snap and her mouth set into a firm, straight line. Mrs. Bascom waited, but when she understood Sylvia did not intend to speak, she did so herself.

'Sylvia Hawley, if you don't try the patience of a saint — and I'm not one. What's come over you? You haven't been acting like yourself at all. Even Dr. New, who hasn't known you well before, has an excuse for thinking your mind is — well, upset.'

She hesitated, hoping this hint might elicit some reply. Sylvia glanced up quickly, and there was evidence of a struggle going on in her mind, but she did not speak.

'Don't you understand I only want to help you? Don't you see your position is rather a precarious one?'

'You mean — I'm suspected of — of some part in this murder?' Sylvia whispered.

'Yes, you are — but not by me. Oh, I can help you, if you'll only let me. I know ——'

'No — no, you don't — you can't!' exploded Sylvia; then added with pathetic pleading, 'You said you'd trust me. I told you before I must go on — alone. Please — please don't ask me anything more. It's hard enough ——'

'Hard, is it?' Mrs. Bascom's tone shifted from sympathy to scorn as she deliberately taunted Sylvia to make her reply. 'I suppose I'm to believe you are suffering while you laugh and talk — yes, flirt with Basil Stacey! And Ruel is shut up in jail, accused of murder!'

Sylvia shrank back and hid her face with one hand, making a gesture with the other as if to push Mrs. Bascom's words away.

'I thought you had some feelings, the ordinary decency of a woman at least,' continued Mrs. Bascom. 'So did we all of us — up till that awful evening. But now —— What do you suppose people can believe, except that you are somehow guilty — don't honestly care what happens as long as you get your employer's money! It's not hard to see why some would rather see you behind the bars than Ruel!'

Sylvia jerked her face from her hands. Her reply was unexpected.

'Then why don't they make the exchange?'

Mrs. Bascom jumped to her feet in astonishment. The prospect of being put into prison, far from frightening Sylvia, seemed to be what she most desired! It was unaccountable, unless —— She clicked her teeth abruptly. What a blind fool she had been not to see it all before!

But her tone showed no change of emotion as she continued her probing mercilessly.

'I think perhaps he'd prefer to stay where he is than to see the way you are carrying on. When he hears how you and Basil ——'

'No — no. He must not hear that!' Sylvia was on her feet, her face ashen and distorted with emotion. She clenched her fists and leaned toward Mrs. Bascom, her words fairly tumbling over one another in a burst of passion. 'Swear to me you'll never tell Ruel! — It isn't true. He'd never believe you. I — I won't have him told. — If you love me — if you have one speck of respect for me or ever had, you'll never tell him.'

'And why shouldn't I tell him what I saw with my own eyes?'

'It's not the truth, I tell you,' almost hysterically Sylvia shouted the words. 'I hate Basil. I ——'

'You think I'll believe that when I — when we all saw you act that way toward him?'

'You must. There was a reason.'

'Well?'

'I can't tell you. — But promise me you won't tell Ruel?'

'Not just yet, Sylvia Hawley, because he's beyond telling. He has escaped from the jail and disappeared!'

Sylvia swayed backward as if from a blow. Her lips formed Mrs. Bascom's words, but she could not speak them aloud. Her eyes fixed on the other woman's face, agonized, as she tottered back and fell into her chair gasping for breath.

'Then you do love Ruel?' questioned Mrs. Bascom seizing her chance.

Sylvia nodded passionately, her defense overthrown.

'You're trying to shield him, is that it? You think that by casting suspicion upon yourself, you —— Sylvia, do you mean you suspect Basil? You're trying to lead him on, flirt with him and find out what he knows?'

Dumbly Sylvia nodded again.

'But that's so foolish. You'll only get yourself into trouble without helping Ruel at all. You must tell me — everything.'

'I — I knew you'd say that. It's why — I couldn't — tell you.'

'But, my dear, don't you see now that I can help you? You're only tangling things up for us all. I know more than you think, and I can see the damage you are doing. I know that Basil was the thief the other night, I know he threatened you, saw you enter the judge's room. I know you lied about the will. I found the dagger in the grain chute with you and have been hiding it ——'

Mrs. Bascom was stunned into silence by the appalling effect her last words had produced. Sylvia seemed about to faint; her eyes were glassy, her breath coming in faint gasps. But she gathered herself together, raised herself to her feet by sheer will power.

'I'll tell you — everything — show you ——'

She took a step, stretching out her hand toward Mrs. Bascom for help and support. The latter sprang to her side and assisted her to the desk where she fumbled under the blotter, at first slowly, then frantically.

'It's gone!' she wailed suddenly, and leaned back against Mrs. Bascom heavily.

CHAPTER XIII

CONFUSION

Mrs. Bascom gently assisted Sylvia to her chair without asking what it was that had disappeared from her desk and so distressed her.

'There, now, you're all upset again, my dear. I'm going to put you to bed at once and ——'

With a perfunctory rap, Dr. New opened the door abruptly and came toward them.

'I was passing down the hall when I heard Miss Hawley cry out,' he explained, looking sharply at Sylvia. 'You're not well at all, are you?'

He took her wrist automatically to feel her pulse.

'She's tired and upset about something,' said Mrs. Bascom. 'I was just suggesting bed for her.'

'See that she goes there,' confirmed the doctor with a meaning glance at Mrs. Bascom. 'I have a little medicine with me — some soothing drops. I'll get them.'

He hurried away, shaking his head to himself, and Mrs. Bascom bent down to unfasten the straps of Sylvia's pumps. She had just completed this task when the doctor returned with a small bottle and drew her aside, ostensibly to give her directions for its use. To these he added a whispered caution: 'Don't let her talk. It might prove dangerous for her to become more excited than she already is. This drug will soothe her nerves and make her sleep.' Mrs. Bascom nodded silently, and he again withdrew.

Listlessly Sylvia allowed herself to be helped into bed, but once there she refused to lie back or take the medicine, sitting erect and tense.

'I must tell you everything before I go to sleep, Mrs. B.'

'To-morrow, my dear, not to-night. The doctor said ——'

'I don't care what he said. I couldn't sleep anyway unless I get this off my mind. I've worried and muddled along trying to do what seemed ——'

'Sylvia, you simply mustn't talk now. These drops will help you to forget it and sleep, and to-morrow I'll listen.'

'I won't take them until after I've told you, Mrs. B.!' decided Sylvia stubbornly. 'I don't like Dr. New anyway. He stares at me peculiarly, is forever asking me questions and telling me to rest. Of course I'm tired — who wouldn't be after going through what has happened to me? But you must listen now and help me as you said you would, Mrs. B. dear.'

Sylvia clutched her hand, but not hysterically. Her voice was steadying itself with each word she spoke, and her eyes seemed clear and normal.

Mrs. Bascom made a quick decision. The doctor was mistaken in his diagnosis of Sylvia's trouble, from what the latter had just said, seemed to think she was in need of close observation. This was partly due to his ignorance of Sylvia's exaggerated mental strain, partly, thought Mrs. Bascom, to her own deliberately misleading hints. Moreover, if confession was good for the soul, it was also relieving to the mind, and Sylvia would rest far better with a clear conscience. Hence Mrs. Bascom did not try to dissuade her further.

'There's so much to tell,' began Sylvia, instinctively dropping her voice to a low murmur as she felt Mrs. Bascom's willingness to listen. 'Every word of what I told you after you found me there in the grain chute, was true — every word. And you said you found a dagger — a knife in it, too? — But I thought you told me ——'

'That was after I went to look at your request,' interrupted Mrs. Bascom to justify her apparent falsehood. 'I truthfully said there was nothing in the chute then. There was not, because I had already removed the knife and hidden it in my dress just after finding you. It was the paper-cutter you missed from Mr. King's study.'

'His own paper-cutter!' echoed Sylvia. Her eyes grew moist with sincere grief, but she winked back the tears resolutely. 'It was after I learned the details of his death that I formed my mad plan. I *tried* to be suspected, tried to act so queerly they would blame me and let Ruel free. Don't you see, it means everything to him, his freedom, whereas for me —— His farm, his success, depends upon his own hands, in a way, and now was just such a critical time for him. Besides, I — we liked each other and I wanted to help, to spare him if I could.'

Mrs. Bascom murmured comfortingly, 'I understand your reasons, my dear. But it was a mad scheme.'

'I know — now. I was afraid to confide in you, sure you'd try to dissuade or actually prevent me from carrying it through. It was hard, but I made myself do it — for his sake. Some things conspired in my favor, others complicated my plans. — I lied about the will. It seemed a sure way of drawing suspicion to me. I knew Mr. King had meant to leave me something — he'd told me so just the day before, said he was drawing up a new will. But I'll tell you about that in a minute.

'The night after you found me, I lay in bed thinking and determined to get that wrong will from the judge and destroy it. If I could do this without being seen, I thought I could confess to the theft or something, but refuse to give up the paper, thus involving myself even deeper. Just as I was trying to scheme a way to accomplish this, I heard the commotion downstairs. It seemed providential. After the men had gone down, I hobbled into the judge's room and was searching his pockets when the pain in my ankle made me feel faint. I was afraid of losing consciousness there in his room, so left without obtaining the will. On the way back to my room, Basil saw me. Later on he told me so and threatened ——'

'I know all about that. I listened, heard what you both said from my room. Perhaps it was wrong, but I thought the end justified ——'

'I'm glad you did.' Sylvia squeezed Mrs. Bascom's hand in lieu of further words. 'Then you know all that without my telling you. Well, the next day I discovered what this supposed thief had taken, as I suspected. It was a package of stocks or securities that Basil had delivered to Mr. King the day before his death. I guessed that he'd taken them again — Basil, I mean — and that made me suspicious of him. I began to recall other little things.

Mr. King had trusted Basil very freely until recently, but something — some business deal — had gone wrong and I think he had begun to suspect Basil of poor judgment if not — well, deliberate manipulation of funds. These stocks had something to do with it all, I know.

'When I left Basil's office to accept Mr. King's position, there had been other things I tried to forget, irregularities I half suspected, but never proved, things he said to me —— Oh, I might as well confess it all. He had proposed to me and proved beastly, intolerable when I rejected him. That was why I was only too glad to get away. I tried to hint to Mr. King, but he did not understand, seemed so sure of his own business acumen that I weakly did not press it. Besides, I did not care to drag in my personal affairs. So I treated Basil amicably for Mr. King's sake.

'But when Basil threatened me, I saw something more behind his move. Of course he was trying to force me to marry him, that I realized at once, but I staved him off with half excuses, determined to play the part of relenting slowly so as to find out if there was anything else he knew — if he had been involved in more than theft. That was why I invited him to my room here, tried to flirt with him and played up to him as I did at dinner. You do understand now?'

'Of course I do. I never did suspect you of anything wrong. I thought you were foolish and did not realize what you were doing. I was hurt at your attitude toward me, too, but now I understand your motive.'

They were silent for a moment, each thinking her own thoughts.

'It has all been useless too. Either he does not know anything about the — the murder, or else he is too sly. I've found out nothing from him.'

'This thing you missed from the desk just now, what was it and why did it upset you?' prompted Mrs. Bascom.

'It was Mr. King's latest will, the one he had drawn up to include a legacy for me. I found it with some papers in his desk and slipped it under that blotter yesterday.'

'Was it signed?'

'By his name only, not witnessed. But I think I can explain that. Somehow it must have been a mistake, don't you see? It was the one he had meant to execute and have witnessed by those people, but it must have gotten mixed with the fake will he had planned to use in the play. I'm sure it must have happened that way. They signed the wrong one, don't you see? I meant to write those three people and ask exactly what happened — see if there was any chance of an error.'

'I'll do it for you — to-night,' said Mrs. Bascom eagerly. 'Better yet, perhaps, I can telephone in the morning. I'm sure you must be right. — Now, Sylvia dear, lie down and sleep. What you've just told me ——'

'Wait. I've told you everything, but I too want to know —— Where is Ruel?' Her voice broke pleadingly.

'Don't worry about him, Sylvia,' smiled Mrs. Bascom, and proceeded to explain how she had prevailed upon him to 'escape,' as well as her reason for being so curt in her manner of revealing this before. 'He's safely in Boston by now.'

'Did he know — did he think that I ——'

'No. I gave him a message from you — made up one such as I thought you'd really want to send him,' murmured Mrs. Bascom with a faint flush in her cheeks as she hastened over this intimate revelation. 'I firmly believe Mr. King used to live in Boston, and Ruel is going to do his best to trace him there. It might help to establish a motive, turn up something in his past, you see.'

'Boston — Boston,' whispered Sylvia thoughtfully. 'Mr. King spoke of it, seemed familiar with it as with many other cities. Yet he never referred to his past to me any more than to his other friends. It may be —— Oh, I hope he finds — something. But what makes you think it was Boston?'

Mrs. Bascom explained her theory as derived from the reading of King's books, and this time she found a willing convert to her deductions. Again she counseled sleep and arose to get the medicine when Sylvia stopped her for a final question.

'Tell me about the paper-knife.'

Mrs. Bascom did so, ending with the details of how it had cut and stained Sylvia's dress.

'Then that was the touch on my shoulder,' said the latter with a shudder. 'And that was what slipped down my back, cutting my dress and falling to the bottom of the chute. It was the — the murderer, hiding it.'

'Probably, but you mustn't think of that now.— Here, drink this and go to sleep. To-morrow we'll talk it over again and plan out a better campaign.'

'You mean to tell Ezra Sewell? I'd trust him. I wanted to tell him before, only that would have spoiled my scheme.' She swallowed the medicine and sank back on her pillow gratefully. 'You've no idea how tired yet rested I feel, now that I've told you and you understand. You've been so kind and dear to me, Mrs. B.'

'I've been a blind fool,' snorted the latter, running her fingers soothingly over Sylvia's smooth forehead.

Sylvia shook her head in denial, smiled, then relaxed like a tired child and was soon peacefully sleeping.

When Mrs. Bascom had turned out the light and opened the window, she retired to her own room, leaving the door between wide open. Slowly she undressed in the dark and got into bed. But as she lay there, wide awake, questions battled in her brain for answers. Why had Judge Brant stolen that unsigned will? Was Basil merely a thief, or did he know something sinister about the murder? Had Dr. New been passing the door as he claimed, or was this more than coincidence? If he had been deliberately listening ——

Idly her own thought of earlier in the evening returned. Basil, Judge Brant, and now Dr. New — all acting strangely! Then another question superseded all the others. Should she take Ezra into her confidence now? It was her plain duty to do so, yet —— Why was it she hesitated? Why did she treat him as she did, unreasonably, belligerently? She liked him, appreciated his common sense, his slow but sure methods, and yet ——

Sleep put an end to her cogitations abruptly.

When she awoke the next morning, her first thoughts were for Sylvia, but one glance sufficed to show she was still asleep, so Mrs. Bascom dressed and went down to breakfast. The men were waiting for her.

'How is Miss Hawley now?' asked Dr. New as they took their places at the table.

'She was still asleep when I came down.'

'What, has she been ill again?' inquired Basil rather offhandedly.

'She suffered a nervous attack last evening. Possibly the strain of being up to dinner.' Dr. New frowned slightly at Mrs. Bascom as if blaming her for this. 'I trust it was nothing worse. — You gave her the medicine — immediately — as I directed?'

'Oh, she insisted upon talking for a few minutes first, and seemed so determined I let her relieve her mind without trying to cross her,' answered Mrs. Bascom quite truthfully, if not wholly accurately.

'Eh? What's that? How long did you let her talk?' The idea disturbed the doctor markedly.

'Only a few minutes. I'm sure it did no harm,' answered Mrs. Bascom with calm self-assurance.

'I'm not so sure, but I hope so.'

Mrs. Bascom skillfully changed the subject at this time. She had no doubts upon the subject, rather thought less of the doctor for his manifest error of diagnosis and consequent qualms.

Halfway through the meal, Basil Stacey was summoned to the telephone, and when he returned he was smiling broadly.

'I'm all flattered! That was a request from none other than Saint Peter, Sewell's right-hand sleuth, for a *tête-à tête* with his master at the jail this morning.'

'Better think over all your sins,' laughed the doctor.

'Luckily, my conscience is clear,' retorted Basil.

Mrs. Bascom bit her lip in an effort to choke back a retort to this remark, but an interruption by the judge saved her from any embarrassing revelation.

'I'm not so sure any one has so much to fear from Sewell. You know, I've been wondering. That man Sewell seems to get nowhere on this case. He impresses me curiously, and I'm considered quite a judge of character.'

'But a rotten punster!' added Basil.

'It wasn't intended, I assure you. I'm serious about this, Mr. Stacey. — As I was saying, two or three times he's seemed quite quick and keen under that drawling manner of his; yet at others, he's dull and stupid. He's not a man of action, and what we need is some one to *do* something. Now I'm dropping down to Boston this morning on a little personal matter, and I've almost decided to hire a detective, one really trained to the profession. What do you think of the idea, Doctor?'

'Not a bad one, as I've already thought of it myself! But I'd hardly call it a good one either. Personally, I believe Sewell is doing all that's possible — which, after all, isn't much, I'll admit. But what could any one else do? There's not a chance of finding any so-called clues now. He's questioned all of us again and again, found out all there is to be learned. In other words, tell me what use a detective could be and I'll be only too glad to help you get one here.'

'Well, detectives are trained men, specialists in the science of reading and interpreting people and motives.'

'People — such as ourselves? Then you suspect one of us?'

'No, no, I don't mean that.'

'And motives, when we know so little about King after all,' continued Dr. New.

'A detective might find out something about him,' blustered Judge Brant.

'How? Where would he start?'

'That would be up to him.'

'Yes, but if we, his closest friends, know nothing, who would? If he has deliberately concealed his past — as it rather seems he has — then don't you suppose he's done a thorough job of it?'

'One thing, though,' interrupted Basil. 'I believe King was once a detective, and that ought to help.'

'No, Basil, I don't see it. Even granted that — which I doubt — it would be rather difficult and expensive, not to mention foolish, to search the whole United States for some record, say twenty years old or so which might mention King. Besides, was that his name — then? — Of course, Judge, do as you see fit, and I'll back you, but frankly this idea doesn't appeal to me — not without something to work on. — What do you say, Mrs. Bascom?'

'I say, leave it to Ezra Sewell,' she answered succinctly.

'The "ayes" have it. Leave it to Ez!' chuckled Basil.

The judge capitulated. As soon as breakfast was over, he left in his automobile which was already at the door, intending to take the first train to Boston. Basil went with him to the village to answer his summons to the jail, the doctor settled down on the piazza to read, and Mrs. Bascom peeked in on Sylvia, then left her asleep to help Martha about the house.

Ten o'clock came and there seemed nothing left to do, so Mrs. Bascom decided the time had come to act. As Sylvia showed no signs of stirring, she left her in Martha's charge and started out to the village to make her delayed confession to Ezra Sewell.

'Going in town?' asked Dr. New with a yawn as she came out of the house.

'Yes, for a little while. There are a couple of things I want to see about. Miss Hawley seems to be resting comfortably and Martha will be on hand when she wakes. Will you be here too?'

'Probably, or not far away. I may take a short walk, but I'll look in on her before I go. — By the way, if you should see Sewell, tell him I shall probably drop down later on in the day to see him. I rather enjoy talking with him, you know, Mrs. Bascom. His conversations are always illuminating.'

'So I've found,' she smiled cryptically as she walked away toward the road.

It was an almost cloudless, warm day yet not too hot to be uncomfortable so she started off briskly. But as she drew nearer the village, her pace slackened.

The prospect of her interview with Ezra was not altogether a pleasant one. Her mind was made up — she would not funk it — yet somehow she felt loath to do her obvious duty. It was not through any doubts or fears that he would suspect Sylvia after he heard the whole truth; it was not for any qualms about involving Basil or Judge Brant. Rather it was a purely personal dislike to admit defeat for herself, to ask for his help in carrying out what she had planned to do herself. Yet now this task had grown too involved and complicated for one person.

Mentally she reviewed what she was about to say, arranged the details chronologically and neatly so that they might be presented in the briefest, clearest form. She wished that Ruel's mission were already completed — and successfully. That at least would be a point in her favor!

Drawing near her house, she decided to obtain the knife and give it to Ezra, thus making a clean sweep of the whole affair. She walked up the path, stooping to pull up an encroaching weed here and there. Weeds are such handy things to have — when they may be used as an excuse to delay an unpleasant duty a little longer!

'Ellen Bascom, you quit tryin' to fool yourself,' she suddenly remarked out loud, after wasting several minutes at this task. 'It don't do you any good stalling and putting this off. March, now! Do your duty like a woman!'

With this injunction, she went straight to the door, unlocked it, then sniffed audibly and paused. A faint odor like that of stale tobacco seemed to reach her nostrils for an instant, only to be drowned out by the fresh breeze that swept in with her.

Tossing her head, she mounted the stairs to the attic and threw back the lid of the trunk where she had put the paper-cutter. She stared. It was not there! In a panic she stepped back a pace and ran her eye along the other closed lids.

'Am I losing my memory? I could have taken my affidavit it was in that one.'

Quickly she opened one after another, removed the top layer of each, felt down the sides, but in vain. The knife, her one bit of tangible evidence, was gone! — That whiff of tobacco in the hall — it had been real, not an hallucination after all. Some one had been in her house!

Mechanically she closed the trunks again and hurried down the stairs into her bedroom. In the doorway she stopped short, involuntarily passing her hand across her eyes to clear her vision of some impossible sight. But it was real! The room was all in confusion. Drawers were pulled open, their contents scattered about ruthlessly; the closet was a jumbled mass of garments, even the bedclothes were mussed and pulled aside.

From room to room she wandered with increasing fear and consternation. Each had been searched with no effort to replace what had been moved about. The whole house had been thoroughly ransacked.

Mrs. Bascom did not touch anything — she was too dazed. Without realizing what she was doing, she walked out the door, locked it, and, clutching the key in her hand, started rapidly down the road, unmindful which way her steps led her as she groped mentally for some explanation of this theft.

That it placed her in a decidedly compromising position was obvious. Whether or not Ezra would have forgiven her for temporarily concealing vital evidence no longer mattered. Now she had lost it, was technically an accessory or something, she thought — might even be subject to imprisonment. Perhaps the murderer had taken the knife. In that case, she had only destroyed another chance of finding him and bringing him to justice.

Wait! There was only one person who had any reason to suspect her of concealing anything, and that person was Ezra himself! But even if he had guessed the truth, why should he have taken this means of securing the knife? Surely he would have first challenged her with his knowledge. Again she could not imagine him leaving everything in such a mess. No, it was some one else, some one who ——

Dr. New! He had been at Sylvia's door listening! It was just before Sylvia had called out that Mrs. Bascom had mentioned finding and concealing the knife, and he must have heard this — searched her house as the logical place for concealment. He had found it then, but why? Did he believe her guilty, or was he merely going to turn it over to Ezra? He had spoken of his intention to call upon Sewell that day, also he was yawning and sleepy. That was it, he had searched her house last night! But her position was still more dangerous now. She must see Ezra at once — explain everything before the doctor told his story.

Her decision made, she looked up and found herself at the entrance to King's drive. In her abstraction, she had walked directly away from the jail where she had meant to go.

She hesitated, decided to look in on Sylvia, then return to the village once more, even though this would mean missing her lunch. The house was silent and apparently deserted, so she ran up the stairs. Just as she reached Sylvia's door, however, it moved open and Dr. New confronted her gravely.

'I'm glad you're back, Mrs. Bascom. You may be needed.'

'What do you mean? Sylvia's not — worse?'

He nodded silently, drawing aside so that she might look into the room. There on the bed lay Sylvia, her eyes closed, her face strangely waxen and lifeless.

'Dr. New — tell me!' gasped Mrs. Bascom, thoroughly alarmed.

'She is in a coma, has not roused since you went away and I cannot wake her. Her pulse and respiration are subnormal, and her reaction ——'

'Tell me in plain words,' interrupted Mrs. Bascom, unconsciously grasping his arm for support.

'There is little I can say. I was worried after what you said of her having talked against my orders, and when she did not awaken, my fears seemed justified. A shock — some sort of nervous reaction, perhaps, I cannot tell as yet. But those words of hers may have been her last for hours — perhaps days. There is nothing we can do now but wait.'

Mrs. Bascom paled, trembled, and clung to him.

'You don't think ——'

'I'm not unnecessarily alarmed yet, nor, in a way, surprised. It is merely a question of time and complete rest, I think. — But do not take it to heart. It was not your fault. She must be kept quiet, that's all. — Did you give Sewell my message?'

'I didn't see him,' gasped Mrs. Bascom weakly. 'What — what can I do?'

'Nothing. Rest, in case you are needed later.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRODIGAL RETURNS

Inspector Sewell was late in keeping his appointment with Basil that morning; in fact, he almost forgot it entirely. He had stepped out for a brief walk and had become so absorbed in speculations over the murder that he had gone much farther than he intended. When he arrived at the jail, however, he found Basil cheerfully talking with Pete, his assistant.

'Sorry to be so late, Stacey,' apologized Sewell with a friendly nod. 'I kind of lost track of time for a bit, I guess.'

'Hard on the trail, eh? — Well, I've been well entertained by Pete here,' grinned Basil.

'Good. Then you ain't really missed me much. Pete's some talker, I know, an' some folks say he's my only rival in that line. — But that ain't neither hare nor hound. Seein' as I kept you waitin' so long, I'll just ask you to stay to dinner with me to make up, if you'd like to.'

'Decidedly. It'll be the first time I ever ate in or accepted an invitation to a jail, Sewell. — My suit is fortunately striped, so I guess I'm already dressed for the part!'

Sewell laughed heartily at the joke, dismissing Pete with a nod and settling down to a comfortable smoke. Under guise of a general conversation he probed Basil about his business, displaying an unexpected knowledge of financial matters. Basil expanded readily, in fact, almost succeeded in making a sale of some speculative stocks to the inspector. It was not definitely closed, however, Sewell deciding with Yankee caution to sleep on the matter. Then the latter began to prepare the meal, taking Basil into his small kitchen while he cooked with appetizing skill and lack of effort.

Over the food the conversation veered around to the affair of the murder, when Basil abruptly asked Sewell if he hadn't forgotten to feed his prisoner, Ruel.

'Oh, I'll tend to him later. It don't do him no harm to wait a bit. About all a man in a cell has to think over is his next meal, an' they say anticipatin' is better than gettin', you know.'

'I see. And a little hunger sometimes loosens a man's tongue, eh?'

Sewell nodded and winked slyly.

'Don't do no harm, anyways. But I thought as you was a friend of his. Sounds like you kind of expected him to confess to somethin'.'

'I do — and I don't, Sewell. I've been thinking over matters a lot recently, and it seems inevitable — his having something to do with it at least. I know you must feel the same way or you wouldn't keep him a prisoner. — As to his being a friend of mine — well, it's hard to express myself clearly. He is, in a casual sort of way, mostly because he was a friend of King's.'

'An' Miss Hawley's?' added Sewell suggestively.

A faint but unmistakable frown momentarily crossed Basil's face.

'Of course. — You understand I like him myself too. He always seemed a solid kind of man, if you know what I mean, not exactly quick and keen, but quiet, almost to the point of dullness in comparison with the people I know. I suppose that's the New-Englandism of him.'

'Maybe, though he ain't always lived in these parts an' he's been to college. Guess he would make a kind of hard man to beat in anythin' he really wanted.'

'Some things, but not others,' smiled Basil assuredly. 'Perhaps it's just that he doesn't seem to fit in with King's other friends, in a way. But what I'm getting at is this. As far as I can see, all the evidence points to him and it's only his denials and half explanations that oppose it. I'd be the last man to suspect him of guilt myself, yet he must be guilty until proved innocent, to twist the phrase, and that doesn't look very promising of accomplishment.'

'But suppose he was shieldin' some one else?' put in Sewell.

'Some one else? — You don't mean — Sylvia?'

'I certain sure do.'

'That's ridiculous. It only goes to show his method of insinuation if he's been trying to throw suspicion that way on an innocent person. Confidentially, that's one of the reasons I don't like him, Sewell. He doesn't seem to know his place at times, assumes liberties, if you know what I mean. I'm afraid it's rank jealousy.'

'You mean you an' her?'

'Between ourselves, yes. We have an — er — understanding.'

'I see. That sort of clears up some things a bit,' mused Sewell aloud. 'It makes some of his remarks kind of more forceful an' I'm glad you warned me.'

'It wasn't a pleasant duty, but after all I'm glad you know.' Basil's manner was quite convincingly relieved, though his smile was a trifle smug.

'Now there's one or two questions I'd like to ask you as might be important in that connection. First off, when he came out of the room after the play, you was standin' there by the window. — Which side was it?'

'On the right as you face the window from the outside. I remember that distinctly.'

'An' you'd just been standin' there all the time?'

'Exactly — waiting for him.'

'That's that. Now the other thing's about the burglary business when those papers was taken. You don't remember anythin' about them? Seems queer, because Ruel was here in jail an' if he was the guilty party ——'

'But the two don't necessarily have any relation, surely.'

'Some one took advantage of King's death to get them papers, seems like to me.'

'Coincidence! Besides, the thief was an outsider, so might have done it without even knowing King was dead.'

'Maybe, but I doubt it. — You don't know any one as wanted any of his papers, then?'

Basil shook his head silently, but did not meet Sewell's gaze.

'Well, now, I tell you what we'll do. I've kind of got a scheme. You sneak out into the next cell to

Ruel's when I open the door into the corridor, an' listen while I ask some questions, see? Better step right inside the cell in case he comes close to the bars, because you can hear just as good an' won't be seen. You listen close, an' later we'll compare notes, see?'

Basil fell in with the plan eagerly. When Sewell opened the door and motioned to him, Basil dodged into the empty cell, drawing its door almost closed behind him and listening as Sewell stepped to Ruel's cell, calling gruffly, 'Now, prisoner, I've decided we'll have a little show-down an' get back of some of this lyin'. Not one bite more food do you get, my man, until you tell the truth an' the whole of it, see? There's ways of makin' a man tell the truth, an' I'd advise you not to make me use too many of 'em.'

Basil waited for a response, pressing against the bars to listen. He scarcely noticed the slight click as the lock snapped into place, but Sewell was listening for it. Suddenly the inspector stepped down closer to the bars of Basil's cell.

'You heard what I said?' he called.

Basil nodded silently, thinking it was a double question both for his and Ruel's benefit, but he was surprised when Sewell continued, addressing him directly:

'Good land, Stacey, you've locked yourself in there an' I can't get you out. The key's mislaid!'

Basil stared at him helplessly, scarcely comprehending what this situation might mean.

'But you must!' he cried, his voice raised sharply as he tugged at the bars. 'I refuse to stay cooped up in this ——'

'Oh, you ain't exactly a prisoner, young man, if that's what you mean. Of course I haven't got any right nor reason to keep you against your will, only you see I can't let you out without a key, can I?' There was a hint of mockery in his tone that did not escape Basil. 'You should have gone into the other cell, anyway. Guess you must have made a mistake again about your directions.'

'Directions? You told me to come here and if you don't ——'

'Hold on. It don't seem as if I'd instruct you to lock yourself in a cell without a key, now, does it? Besides, if you got into the wrong one, I'm not so surprised, though I can't see why a man should get all confused over which is his right an' which his left hand. But there have been cases. Take a man I know, for instance, who stands on the left of a window, yet insists it was the right. You'd think he'd know better, wouldn't you?'

'What do you mean? What are you babbling about?' yelled Basil, but the color came and went in his cheeks with great rapidity.

'An' since it looks as if you'd have to stay here a bit till I get somethin' to let you out with — them bars are mighty stout — here's another little puzzle you might kind of think over for somethin' to occupy your mind. When I come back, we'll talk it over some more, perhaps. You see I'm sort of wonderin' about a certain man I know. He committed a theft of some papers like, an' sent 'em away by mail ——'

'You mean to insinuate I —— You're keeping me here illegally for ——'

'Hold on, Stacey. No need to get all roiled up that way. I ain't said no names at all, have I? I was just explainin' some interestin' ideas of mine an' you seem to think they fit you so well you're denyin' 'em all! As to keepin' you here, that ain't my fault. I didn't lock you up or anythin', did I? It was just an accident like. Of course I can't hold you even if I'd wanted to. But knowin' you're so anxious to help out in this mystery, maybe you'll overlook any inconvenience of bein' here — until I can find that key to let you out, see? Meanwhile, I guessed you'd like somethin' to think about an' pass the time.'

Sewell's words were apologetic, but his tone was not sincere, so that their double meaning was obvious. Basil was not a prisoner, yet he might be held there until he satisfied Sewell's purpose and would have no cause for objection later. He began to storm and bluster, but the inspector turned away, muttering that he had better set about looking for that key. Then Basil called aloud to Ruel to witness his plight, but when he received no answer, Sewell poked his head in the corridor door for a final gibe.

'Guess you won't get no response out of Ruel just now. Maybe you'd like to figure out why!' Then he closed the door with a bang and sat down to think. That his ruse would quickly scare a confession from Basil he felt certain, but that this confession would prove of little real value he also felt decided. From his talk with this man and a study of his character, Sewell had evolved a theory that quite plausibly explained everything. Basil was greedy — a sharper in business. He had stolen back some stocks which, if found, would somehow react to his loss or discredit. That accounted for the robbery.

As to the rest, he did not seem either cunning or brainy enough to have planned and executed this murder. His presence on the wrong side of the window when Ruel came out, no doubt had some simple explanation. Also his attitude toward Miss Hawley was quite clear. He was trying to force her into marriage to obtain King's legacy. He had spoken of an 'understanding,' had acted confidently, but not until to-day. Obviously he had been talking to her, probably held some threat over her. This would account for her strangely upset and nervous condition.

Sewell's contemplations had reached this point when they were suddenly interrupted by the entrance of Judge Brant, who had just returned on the afternoon train from Boston. He was quite red in the face and excited.

'Just dropped in for a little call, Sewell,' he began, glancing about the room quickly.

'Glad to see you, Judge. Sit down. I was wantin' to have a talk with you,' answered Sewell, noting his eagerness questioningly. 'Been to the city? Have a good trip?'

'Yes, quite an interesting one,' said the Judge, sticking a cigar in the corner of his mouth and preferring to chew it rather than light it. 'How is the case progressing, Inspector?'

'Slow, slow. But things are headin' up some.'

'And how is your prisoner?'

'Prisoner? Well, he's kind of restless, but I gave him somethin' to occupy his mind for a bit.'

'He's still in his cell, of course?'

'Locked up, snug as you please.'

'Then I'd like to see him for a moment.'

'Now, Judge, don't know as I can allow that,' answered Sewell without change of expression, but becoming alert. 'Don't see as that would be policy just now.'

'Why not?'

'Well, you see he's a guilty man, one that's under suspicion, at least, an' not one to receive callers. Besides, you're sort of an interested party an' that makes it bad.'

'Interested in finding the murderer, yes. But I want to see your prisoner for a minute.'

'Then I've got to know why, Judge. Don't seem to me you'd have any real important reason for seein' him as I can figure out.'

'Oh, I won't speak to him if you forbid that,' answered the judge rather testily.

'Hm. Then why disturb him at all?'

'Why? I'll tell you why. Because I don't believe he's there at all! You're lying to me, Sewell, and I'm dissatisfied with the way you're handling this affair. I almost hired a real detective to-day, and now I'm sorry I didn't!'

'You mean to say you don't believe I have a prisoner?' remarked Sewell, apparently not at all disturbed by this accusation. 'But I swear he's there safe an' sound.'

'Then why this hesitation about letting me prove it for myself?'

'An' if I might say the same to you, why this sudden notion of yours that he ain't?'

'Because I've seen him with my own eyes — in Boston, that's why!'

Sewell was not entirely unprepared for this answer, so he was able to conceal his thoughts. It complicated matters quite badly. The judge was suspicious and antagonistic. It would be hard to explain matters to him without either drawing in Mrs. Bascom, which would be disastrous in every way, or without further exposing himself to the charge of incompetence in his official capacity. His eyes flitted about the room for an instant, paused at the open window behind the judge's back, then returned to his accuser's face placidly.

'Sure you weren't mistaken in thinkin' you saw Ruel in Boston?' His voice was unnecessarily loud and sharp.

'Positive. I met him almost face to face, but was so astonished he slipped away before I could think to call the police.'

'Queer. Seems like it must have been his double, then.'

'Why not prove it without further hedging?' snapped the judge puffing to his feet with determination.

'All right, I will, seein' as you insist,' said Sewell, standing up in turn. 'We'll go in there,' he motioned with his thumb toward the closed door into the cell corridor, 'an' I'll prove you're wrong. But first I've got a question or two to ask you myself, Judge. If you don't mind comin' into my bedroom so there's no chance of bein' overheard, I'd like to tell you somethin' confidential, an' then I'll prove Ruel is there in his cell all right.'

His assurance nettled the judge, but he nodded assent briefly. Sewell led the way into the inner room and closed the door behind him.

'Now, then, Judge, you're accusin' me of bein' slow. Well, maybe I have been, but I've heard some things, right enough — more'n I'd have heard by threatenin' an' accusin' people right and left. For instance, I've got the knife as was used to kill King; I know who did the thievin' after his death; I know how the murder was done exactly, where the man stood ——'

'The man or the woman,' interrupted the judge. Though obviously impressed by Sewell's manner and words, he appeared equally innocent of any foreknowledge of these facts.

'No, I said "man." You're basin' too much on Miss Hawley's attitude about things.'

'Wait. Since you know so much, let me add something you haven't learned. There is more than mere suspicion about that will which makes me mistrust her. — The night of the theft, now. You rather convinced me that Mrs. Bascom did not go to my room, but some one else did, of that I was sure. Again, King had told me of his intention to redraw his will, leaving a more generous share of his estate to her, that is, Miss Hawley, but certainly not all of it. That kept recurring to my mind unpleasantly. Of course she had access to his papers, so — to cut directly to the point — I searched her room on the chance of finding something further. I also searched Mrs. Bascom's. In Miss Hawley's, I did find something — quite interesting.'

He paused for a too obvious dramatic effect, rather overdoing it.

'I found a draft of that will King had spoken about — the one containing her legacy. It was signed by him, but not witnessed, hence not legal. And that's not all. It was hand-written in the same ink as the one used in the play, and was almost exactly the same in provisions as his former will except for this new bequest. That proves he really meant it to stand and that this play one was somehow a mistake, see? — Now, why was Miss Hawley concealing this and insisting on the probating of the false one? Answer me that!'

The inspector shook his head gravely; he could not answer it.

'One thing more. Whatever Miss Hawley's reasons are for acting this way, I'm firmly convinced Mrs. Bascom not only is aware of them, but is abetting her. I've noticed many little things and I'm positive they understand each other.'

'Perhaps I agree with you there, Judge. Anyway, I thank you for tellin' me this, an' I think it'll help quite a lot.'

'How? I don't see.'

'Nor I either — definitely. But I've got a plan to try out an', unless I miss my guess, I'll know quite a lot more before night.'

'You mean you have a concrete suspicion? If so, why don't you *do* something.'

'I'm goin' to, only knowin' some things an' people as I do, it don't seem wise to be too hasty about it. I think —— Hold on, there's the telephone.'

Sewell opened the door into the office, inwardly thankful for the interruption. He took down the receiver and before he could speak a woman's voice challenged him.

'That you, Ezra Sewell?'

'Certain sure, Ellen B.'

'I want to talk with you. It's something important I have to tell.'

'About time,' answered Sewell cheerfully, 'only better not say it over the 'phone if its important.'

'When will you be up here?' she cut in, ignoring his provocative taunt on her common sense.

'Soon as I can, Ellen.'

The receiver clicked in his ear. It must be truly important, thought Sewell, for she had sounded quite humble and disturbed, had not flashed back at him at all. Probably she had discovered the loss of the knife, eh?

'Now, then, Judge, if you want to see the prisoner with your own eyes, come along,' said Sewell aloud. He opened the door into the corridor and pointed to Ruel's cell.

Judge Brant stepped forward and looked in at the barred door. There lay a man on the cot, apparently asleep. At that moment, however, he stirred, twisting his head slightly around so that the judge could see his face. It was Ruel! The skepticism faded from the judge's face as he turned to Sewell with a nod.

'I'm satisfied, though I could have sworn that was Ruel in Boston.'

At the sound of his voice, Basil suddenly appeared in his cell, then quickly drew back again. His first impulse had been to call out, but he checked it. After all, he did not wish to announce his predicament, make it worse by explaining himself to the judge unnecessarily. But as soon as he had heard the judge leave the jail, Basil called to Sewell, who came to his cell at once.

‘Has he gone?’

‘Who, Judge Brant? Yep, he’s gone.’

‘Then listen, Sewell. I swear to you this is gospel truth. I did take some papers from the drawer of King’s desk. They were an — an unfortunate investment I’d made for him — some stocks, you see. I mailed them to my office, as you evidently found out somehow, in order to rectify the error. I swear he — or rather his heir — won’t lose by it. They were technically my stocks, in a way, and I ——’

‘Never mind tryin’ to excuse yourself, Stacey. You admit you took ’em. — An’ you don’t know nothin’ else about his death?’

‘On my word of honor — no.’

‘What about that matter of bein’ on the wrong side of the window after the play?’

‘I’d been trying to get those stocks then. While Ruel was carrying on the play, I ran to the house, knowing no one would be there. But the drawer was locked and I hadn’t time to get the stocks. I hurried back just as Ruel came out.’

‘Didn’t notice anythin’ else? How did you come back, which way, I mean?’

‘Around the front of the barn and up the hill. It was the quicker way.’

‘Didn’t happen to notice anythin’ unusual — toward the back, say?’

‘Not a thing. What do you mean?’

‘Never mind. — Guess I believe you this time, Stacey, only take warnin’. It don’t pay to tell fibs. You always get found out an’ maybe get into bad trouble.’

Basil's mind was taken up at that moment with something more important to him.

'Have you found the key yet?' he asked anxiously.

'The key? Well, now, seems as if I'd just thought of where it might be!'

Sewell shuffled away to return a moment later and unlock the door. Immediately Basil stepped out with a sigh of relief.

'There's no need for any one to know about — about this business and my being shut up here, is there, Sewell?'

'Maybe not. Can't tell yet. But I'd kind of advise you to stay pretty close to King's house for the next day or two, Stacey.'

'Don't worry. I will. I'm afraid not to — now.' He glanced curiously in at the sleeping Ruel. 'I've got a lot more sympathy for him after this experience.'

Sewell chuckled mildly, but made no reply as Basil hurried out of the jail, anxious to get as far away from it as possible. As soon as he had left the corridor, Ruel opened one eye experimentally, then jumped to his feet.

'Gosh a'mighty, Ruel, I'm glad to see you again,' exclaimed Sewell fervently. 'Give me the key so I can come in. — It was kind of nip an' tuck for a while back there. When I saw you peekin' in at the window, while I was stallin' the judge, I almost let out a yell an' spoiled it all. An' I'm glad you took the hint an' snuck in here.'

'I was on the same train with him,' explained Ruel. 'I knew he'd seen me in Boston and I'd completed my job, anyway.'

'Didn't find what she'd sent you for, eh?'

'She? — Then you know? — But I did, Ez. I found out King had lived in Boston, only — well, I hated to dig up his past, Ez, once I found its trail. It may establish a motive, but, for God's sake, let's leave his past buried otherwise.'

'As bad as that, Ruel?'

'Yes.' Slowly he withdrew a photograph, and some papers covered with penciled writing from his pocket, placed them before the inspector, then began his story in a low, vibrant tone.

CHAPTER XV

MRS. BASCOM CAPITULATES

'Since you know about Mrs. Bascom's hand in my going away, I need not explain why I left the jail here, Ez.'

The inspector had seated himself on the cot bed in Ruel's cell as the latter paced the floor, recounting his experiences on that hasty trip to Boston.

'It wasn't very hard to persuade me, especially as it was a chance to *do* something instead of sitting cooped up here. I hoped you would understand I wasn't running away.

'Well, I took a short cut through the woods to the main road, where I was lucky enough to get picked up by a man who was driving in his automobile to Boston. We made it in good time, and I started looking for any record of "Detective King." I can't begin to tell you how many places I ——'

'Don't try, son. Just skip to the important part,' interrupted Ezra.

'That was this morning. Mrs. B. had thought the murder was the work of some ex-convict, you know, who held a grudge against King as a detective. I happened to think of those figures in that connection, wondered if it was possible for them to have been his prison number. So I went to the Charlestown Jail to check up on them. For some reason the police in Boston had been very willing to help me in every way, so got me the proper credentials.'

'They would. I telephoned 'em that you, as my agent, was to have clear hoein'.'

'So that was it! — Well, I found the number in the Rogues' Gallery all right, but not what I expected. The convict's photographs were all too plainly King!'

'Hold on, Ruel. It's easy to be mistaken in photos sometimes.'

'Don't think I didn't *want* to be, Ez, but the likeness was too strong and obvious. It was King, younger and under the name of Jameson, but King beyond a doubt. Then I looked up his record, later copied parts of it and the newspaper accounts of his trial. You'll find it all as I wrote it down.' He pointed to the papers he had taken from his pocket, but Sewell scarcely glanced at them.

'Tell me about it yourself, Ruel, kind of brief like,' he commanded.

'It's not very complicated. Jameson, or King as we knew him, was in partnership with an older man named Fox. Under cover of a merchandising brokerage business, it appeared they had been carrying on some sort of shady work, smuggling or something like that. Finally the Government got on their trail through some deal in jewels, and laid a plot to capture the whole gang red-handed. They did get many of the lesser agents, and when they entered the partners' office suddenly, they found King bending over Fox, who was dead — stabbed. The knife was in King's hand.

'King — I can't think of him as Jameson — was tried and all the evidence established his guilt, though he maintained he was innocent, even denied all knowledge of the illegal deals and so on. When his lawyer saw how the verdict was going, he evidently persuaded King to change his plea to self-defense. The sentence was finally given for manslaughter.

'After twelve years in jail, King was pardoned and seemed to have disappeared. That was eight years before he came to New York.'

'An' he was wealthy then, eh?' muttered Sewell, half to himself.

'No, that was one of the ameliorating circumstances to his release. His partner seemed to have kept most of the money, and it was never found. — Oh, I don't believe King was guilty in any way. The money he made was his own, because he was a good business man and writer of fiction. He was too kind, honest, and sincere a man for such things.'

'Seems so,' echoed Sewell, 'but it looks now as if no one would ever know for certain. — But see here. His partner, anyway, was dealin' shady. That means he must have had a lot of others helpin' him. See the point? It might have been one of 'em, one of his gang that followed King an' tried to blackmail him — finally killed him. That's logical, even if the rest ain't.'

'But such a man could not have been one of his guests, Ez.'

'Yes, he could. If King was innocent, he wouldn't have known any of 'em, the gang, see? This man might have made friends with him on purpose. — Well, anyway, I guess that proves the motive, certain sure — it was blackmail or sort of revenge. But the question still is, who was the man?'

'You haven't discovered anything since I left?'

'Yep, quite some, an' I guess there's more comin' right quick.'

'How? What?'

'Never mind now. Guess I'll wait a bit an' maybe tell it all in a bunch.'

'At least, Ez, tell me about Basil. What was he doing in that cell? I was dumfounded when he first spoke, though I realized it was a sort of confession he was making.'

'Believe what he said?'

'Yes, I do. It explains everything he did. He's weak, capable of desperate means to protect his interests, but I'm certain not of murder. I don't admire him exactly ——'

'Nor he you!' chuckled Sewell, then recounted the facts of Basil's temporary confinement. 'But here I am gaddin' as if I had nothin' else to do when Ellen B.'s waitin' for me. — You just rest up a bit, Ruel. You've earned it, I guess. Only don't go listenin' to any more Eves' or Ellens' temptin's, see? Jail-breakin' ain't no joke, Ruel, an' I'm kind of pergerin' myself, coverin' your trail. Guess I ain't makin' no mistake, though.'

With this injunction, Sewell went out, locking the door behind him, climbed into his automobile and drove rapidly to King's house. Mrs. Bascom, having heard his noisy approach, met him on the steps. Her kindly face was rather strained and pale, but her eyes did not falter as they met his.

'Afternoon to you, Ellen B. I was kind of held up a bit gettin' here, for which I apologize, seein' as it ain't right to keep a woman waitin' — especially you.'

To his surprise, she did not make any sarcastic retort such as he had expected.

'Ezra Sewell, I've got a lot to tell you,' she answered seriously. 'Let's go out on the lawn a bit.'

Her glance about was eloquent. Plainly, she feared being overheard, so chose the lawn where no one could approach without being seen.

'How's Miss Hawley to-day?' remarked Ezra as they walked toward the elm tree in the center of the grass plot.

'Worse. She's in a coma, and Dr. New is afraid it may be serious.'

'You mean she's really sick?'

'Yes. And it's all my fault.'

'Shucks, Ellen B. Don't believe it for a minute. You'd never hurt a fly — even if you got a chance to swat it.'

She did not respond to this gibe, but faced him, tense yet hesitant. Twice she tried to speak and failed. Her eyes dropped nervously from his face and her hands fluttered aimlessly about the pleats of her dress.

'Ezra, I've been a — a foolish woman, and it's not easy to start tellin' on myself.' Unconsciously she slurred her words and brought them out in awkward breaths.

'Gosh, Ellen, if that's all that's troublin' you, let me help out a bit. — You kind of think I don't know much about this affair, eh? Well, you ain't the only one of that opinion, an' I'm glad of it. That an' lettin' others do a lot of talkin' has learned me things. Land knows there's lots I wish I knew — some as I hope you'll tell me now — but still I do know perhaps more than you calculate. 'For instance, I know Basil stole those papers an' why, also that he probably is holdin' somethin' over Sylvia's head. Then again, I know about the judge, pokin' into ladies' rooms. — Oh, so that ain't news to you, eh? — Well, here's another. Ruel's back an' what he found about King helps some. Then there's the paper-knife as was used to kill King. I know ——'

He stopped short at the audible gasp and the strangely awed expression that came into Mrs. Bascom's face.

'Ezra Sewell, you — you mean to say you know — I ——'

He smiled at her confusion, but not unkindly.

'There's ways of findin' out things, Ellen B., an' I've found 'em! But I guess if you an' me sort of get together on some of 'em, instead of pullin' crosswise, it might help a bit, eh?'

'Ezra Sewell, if I'd only known this before —— What a smart Alec I've been!' She was almost sniveling with the sudden relief of her wrought-up emotions.

'There — there, it's all right, Ellen B. I couldn't understand you for — for keepin' back from me, b-but I never did suspect you of no wrong nor nothin' like that.' Sewell was so embarrassed that he stuttered as he clumsily tried to soothe her.

'I've been a fool — a fool! And to think you were trustin' me all the time too, while I was only trying to be a better detective than you.'

Ezra burst into a laugh that he could not control.

'A detective, Ellen? Well, I never! If that don't explain most everythin' in a word. So that was why you was so clever an' smart at findin' things, cookin' up ideas an' concealin' information. A she-detective! An' you succeeded too. Why, look at that inspiration about King's past life, an' findin' the murderer's weapon ——'

'That was only because I happened to come on Sylvia first. Oh, I should never have kept it from you, only I thought — I ——'

'You thought I was kind of passin' out on the job. Still, I heard you defendin' me once, Ellen, an' I don't hold nothin' against you — not if you tell me everythin' now.'

'I will, Ezra. It'll be easy and a relief.' She was recovering her poise rapidly and once more faced him steadily, alert and eager. 'You've got the knife, then?'

He nodded silently.

'I thought — I hoped so, only it didn't seem like you to turn my whole house upside down. I suppose, not knowing just where it was ——'

'What's that? Guess you'd better begin at the beginnin', Ellen. I got the knife 'cause I guessed where it was, but if your house has been searched, that wasn't my doin'. — Let's take one thing at a time, startin' — well, wherever you began detectin'.'

Mrs. Bascom needed no further encouragement. With obvious relief in her tone she began her story, relating everything in detail and speaking rapidly. She recapitulated her share in the discovery of the murder, told of finding Sylvia and the knife, repeated Sylvia's description of her accident, what she had seen at the time of the robbery, and the overheard conversation between Sylvia and Basil. At this point, Sewell interrupted for a moment to tell of his recent conversation with Basil and the latter's confession.

An account of Judge Brant's search of the two women's rooms, the discovery that the knife had disappeared and Sylvia's most recent confession ended Mrs. Bascom's revelations. Sewell capped them with the judge's explanation for his search of the rooms.

'I should say, ma'am, your career as a detective has been a mighty strenuous one,' continued Sewell. 'An' it's been mighty useful too. Some ways it looks better, after all — not hearin' all that till now, I mean — because it puts everythin' plain an' unconfusin'.'

'I don't see anything very plain about it, Ezra. All it does is clear Sylvia and Ruel, who never needed it.'

'An' some others, too, Ellen B. Yourself, for instance. Oh, you needn't jump like a scared pullet. I don't mean I suspected you of murder, but I did of knowin' too many things an' keepin' mum about 'em. Guess you gave me reason enough, too.'

'Then why didn't you ask me outright about them? I'd have told you if I'd known how much you'd found out already.'

'Would you?' responded Ezra quizzically. But he did not wait for an answer as he ruminated aloud, 'Now, then, let's sort of arrange things a little. Sylvia an' you are out of it — entire. So is Ruel, in my opinion. Basil Stacey — well, I kind of think he told about all he knew, an' I don't somehow believe he had spunk enough to do anythin' worse than thievin' to protect his own hide. That leaves Judge Brant an' Dr. New on the scene — unless it was one of the other guests, an' I doubt that.

'The judge, now. He's appeared keen on findin' the murderer, an' the things he's been doin', when he explained 'em, seem reasonable enough. The doctor, of course, never was involved, except for his bein' on the spot like. Yet it's got to be one of those men, Ellen B. The oiled door, the pieces of cement on the window an' floor, an' all the careful arrangements prove it was one of the guests. Add the motive we've just turned up — thanks to you, ma'am — an' — well, common sense, an' intuition, an' everythin', an' it comes out Stacey or Brant or New.'

'Explain the motive. You said Ruel was back, but you haven't told me what he found.'

'It was kind of a shock, Ellen.'

'I know. But it seemed the only way. I could not go to Boston myself, and you ——'

'Oh, I don't mean your sendin' Ruel there. That was clever of you, Ellen, but kind of obvious — the way you was so carefully an' loosely tied up when you didn't have to be at all, bein' locked in the cell. — No, I mean the facts he found were a shock.'

Briefly he recounted what he had just learned from Ruel, while Mrs. Bascom breathed in quick gasps.

'His life as we know it,' finished Ezra, 'don't seem to gibe with such a history, an' yet ——'

'Of course it does,' she interrupted with quick sympathy. 'He never was guilty to begin with — he couldn't have been. It was all his scheming partner and his gang. But King was just the sort of man to take everything on his shoulders — give himself and his money to others in a mistaken sense of restitution to society or whatever you're a mind to call it. Besides, it may have been his partner's hidden money he did it with.'

'By gosh a'mighty! I bet you're right at that,' muttered Sewell, impressed with the logic of the idea. 'It ain't no use denyin' it, Ellen B., we ought to team up together — when it comes to detectin', I mean,' he added somewhat hastily and with a touch of embarrassment. 'Anyway, that number bein' written on the paper in his pocket shows some one knew about his past trouble, an' that some one must have been among the guests. It seems logical King might never have known him, an' that all goes to prove it was one of this partner's gang, seems to me.'

'It would explain a lot, but how are we going to tell which one it was? I don't see that all this brings us any nearer finding the man who killed King.'

'Wait a minute. What about your house bein' all upset? I didn't do it, so who did an' why? That's the final proof, see? One of these here men did it, 'cause he's handy an' knows what's goin' on all the time.'

'You mean it was some one after the knife?'

'That or somethin' connected with the murder as he thought you had. Basil, now, he seems quite a breaker into things. Do you suppose he'd have done it for any reason?'

Mrs. Bascom stared thoughtfully at Sewell for a moment.

'It's possible. He was away from the house a good deal yesterday, but if he didn't commit the murder, as it seems likely, why should he go after the knife?'

'You're sure you never mentioned to no one where you'd kept it?'

'Never, not even to Sylvia.'

'Well, that seems to end it. There's still one chance left, though. I kind of — well, saw that you was concealin' somethin' in your dress that day you had the knife. It's possible he or some one might have guessed the same thing as I did, an' looked for it just to give it over to me.'

Again they seemed to have argued in a circle, but it did not worry Ezra. It was not the first time he had struggled on after apparently baffling defeat. He started once more to build a sound case against Basil, only to find it could be knocked down too easily. In passing, he mentioned Sylvia's name and this recalled her condition to Mrs. Bascom.

'I'm so glad she told me everything before this relapse. — You don't think her condition is serious, do you?'

'Not bein' a doctor, I can't say, Ellen.'

'I mean, judging from what you saw of her, from your talk with her, you'd not think her mind affected seriously or anything, would you?'

'Far from it, Ellen. She was upset in her mind — an' who wouldn't have been with what we now know was in it — but I couldn't get nothin' out of her except what she had a mind to tell. I could see she was thinkin' rapid, an' she dodged certain questions quite neat — like you did — but all that, I should say, showed she was far from sick.'

'But she is now. — Ezra, I'm worried. If I helped to cause her relapse as Dr. New said ——'

'He's got to blame some one, ain't he, an' you was handy. A patient under his care gets worse; whose fault is it? Certainly not his! — Shucks, Ellen, if her mind's affected like he says, that wasn't your fault. Why, you couldn't get into her mind like a germ — nor influence it much up to lately, as far as I can make out.'

This comforted Mrs. Bascom considerably, so that when they turned toward the house, she felt quite buoyant and ready to throw herself into the work once more. First she went to look at Sylvia, but found her condition unchanged. The doctor had left some medicine to be taken immediately if she stirred, and this stood ready by the side of her bed. Inexpertly Mrs. Bascom tried to feel Sylvia's pulse, but gave up after several attempts when each count proved so widely divergent from the last. She took a book and sat by the window without opening it, mulling over the news which Ezra had imparted to her, but her sense of relief at having shifted the responsibility to Ezra's shoulders was so great that she could not think clearly.

In the meantime, the inspector had driven straight to Mrs. Bascom's house. She had mentioned the fact that the key was no longer under the mat, so he had borrowed it from her. Now he entered boldly, ran up a shade to let in the light and began a search of his own.

Everything was still in confusion, as Mrs. Bascom had not tried to straighten up, but his search was fruitless. Taking a magnifying-glass from the parlor table, he studied the knobs and edges of the drawers that had been opened, scrutinized parts of the woodwork, table-tops, chairs, but after doing this in three rooms, he gave up the task. There were no fingerprints, only faint blurs here and there. Obviously the intruder had worn gloves, just as the murderer had!

Leaving the lower rooms, Sewell ascended the stairs and opened a door at the end of the hall. The room was stuffy with the odor of musk, which, he found, proceeded from a broken vial in the bureau drawer. It seemed to warn him that he was trespassing on no man's ground, and he flushed to himself as he rather hastily resumed his search. It was in vain. Nowhere was there a clue as to the identity of the intruder.

Disappointed, he carefully drew down the shade on the lower floor room again, locked the door, and left the house, muttering, 'Now, what in time was he after, I'd like to know? There's one thing certain, he wasn't a burglar, since nothin' seemed to have been taken, an' he did know what he was about, wearin' gloves.'

At the jail, Sewell went straight to the safe and took out his meager store of clues one by one. These he carried into Ruel's cell and spread out on the cot. Ruel started forward at the sight of the knife, but fell back again at a sign from the inspector.

'Don't you touch a thing, son. You just listen to me with both ears forward an' I'm goin' to tell you everythin', just in the order it happened, whether it was me or Ellen B. or any one else as really found it out. They say two heads are better than one. Well, let's see if three is better yet. An', mind you, not an interruption till I finish. This is only part for your benefit an' most to hear myself tell everythin' I know, see?'

Ruel nodded mutely, his eyes wavering back and forth between the clues and Sewell's serious face. Then the latter began, speaking in a slow, emotionless drawl, picturing everything that had occurred as if some third person had shared in or watched it, detail by detail. Several times Ruel choked back an exclamation or question with difficulty, but he did not speak until Sewell had ceased talking. Even then he kept silent, for there seemed nothing he could add, no solution for the mystery he could offer.

'Well?' interrogated Sewell at length. 'Am I to take it a third head is as befoozled as two of 'em?'

'At least it all goes to show one thing,' began Ruel hopefully. 'It proves Sylvia is innocent, was only ——'

'My soul an' body!' cried Sewell thunderously. 'I might have known it. When I take pains to lay the whole thing open before you, ask you to help me an' treat you confidential with every bloomin' detail, all you've got to say is that Sylvia's innocent!'

'But I did listen carefully, Ez,' said Ruel, abashed. 'I followed every word, only I don't see as it clears up anything except her and Mrs. Bascom's attitudes. I don't mean ——'

'Oh, well, I should have expected it,' said Sewell philosophically, a twinkle creeping into the corners of his eyes, though his frown did not relax. 'It was the same way with her — sayin' as she'd done it all for your sake an' talkin' to Ellen B. an' tellin' her about lyin' an' falsifyin' things just because she — because of you.'

'Did she say that, Ez?' pleaded Ruel, seizing him by the arm in his eagerness.

'Let go my arm! What you tryin' to do, bust it clean off with your sledgehammer hand? — There. That's better. — Of course she said it, an' probably a lot more things Ellen an' I'd blush to repeat. — Hey, where do you think you're goin' now?'

'To see Sylvia!'

'No, you ain't, young man. You stay right here an' act sensible.'

'Sensible? That's exactly what I'm doing.'

'Hump. — Look here, son. She's sleepin' an' needs the rest. She's plum worn out lyin' for you,' reasoned Sewell, concealing the seriousness of her rest, for he knew such knowledge would drive Ruel straight to her side. 'You don't want to make her any worse, do you? — Well, then, wait till to-morrow, anyway. Guess one day more or less won't make no difference to you two.'

'That's all you know about it,' muttered Ruel, but he subsided restlessly on a corner of the cot. A moment later he was on his feet, grasping Sewell's hand and wringing it until it brought a yell of pain from the inspector.

'Let go of me, you young ox,' he bellowed. 'I'll have to arrest you for assault an' battery too, if you don't leave me be.'

'But, Ez, I've got to tell you how much I ——'

'No, you ain't. I won't listen to you. I've got enough on my mind now, without havin' to listen to — well, to what you've got to say.'

Sewell swept the clues up with one hand, and almost ran from the room, kicking the door shut behind him violently to hide his chuckles.

His smile faded rapidly, however, as he locked the articles in the safe once more, then sat down at his desk, gazing speculatively at his little list of suspects with the comments he had noted opposite each name.

'He ain't fallen into a trap of his own makin' yet. Now I wonder if he will — or have I got to set one for him? — The trouble is, I don't know exactly how to bait it, seein' as I ain't certain sure which one he is. But he's gettin' nervous an' more darin', an' whichever he is, that's somethin'. Sooner or later truth'll come out, only if Ellen an' me could only push it along a mite faster. — Detective Ellen Bascom an' Inspector Ezra Sewell ——'

He chuckled, then became pensively silent.

CHAPTER XVI

CONFLICTING WILLS

WHEN Inspector Sewell arrived at King's house the next day, he seemed tired and hollow-eyed. That was the result of long hours of thought and vain planning. Being of that healthy type of men who are used to regularity and a full nine hours of sleep each night, the lack of it showed plainly in his face. Yet his shoulders were erect, his eyes as keenly alert as ever in spite of the dark arcs below them.

Mrs. Bascom met him at the door. By contrast, she seemed to have rested and relaxed from her overwrought emotions of the previous day, for her face was calm and unworried, her poise assured.

'Good-morning, Ezra.' She eyed him sharply and her mood softened further.

''Mornin', Ellen B. You look perky as a lark an' fresh as a daisy.'

'Can't say you do, Ezra.' It might have been a taunt, but her tone robbed the words of any such interpretation.

'Guess daisies an' larks ain't in my line,' grinned Ezra. 'How's Sylvia?'

'Just the same. — Before I forget it, I think I left a handkerchief in your automobile yesterday. Will you help me find it?'

Mrs. Bascom moved down the drive toward the car and Sewell followed, after her meaning glance at him. When they reached it, she went to one side and began fumbling around the seats while he did likewise on the other.

'I thought it best to take precautions,' explained Mrs. Bascom quietly. 'I wanted you to see this letter I received in answer to one I wrote.'

She dropped a sheet of notepaper to the floor of the automobile, and Ezra, with a nod of approval, bent closer to read it while he pretended to putter about. When he had finished it, he stuck the note into his pocket.

'Thanks, Ellen. I guess we'd better talk it over with the judge.'

'I didn't know what your plans were — whether you wanted to confide anything to him or the others,' answered Mrs. Bascom, and the suggestion of her complete dependence upon his decision revealed to what extent she had now confided in him.

'Some things, yes, but not all. I — it's sort of nice of you, Ellen B., to — well, to do like this,' stammered Ezra, suddenly ill at ease for no accountable reason.

'I want you to handle things — to assume the responsibility. That's why I told you,' she replied readily. 'I'm out of this from now on.'

'Not if I can help it. You've got to assist me, Detective Bascom,' he grinned, continuing before she could interrupt with more than a vague gesture of deprecation — 'this is what I aim to do now, subject to change without notice, as they say. Not a hint about what Sylvia's told you, nor about the knife nor King's past. Otherwise I'll act trustin' as ever, an' you do it, too. Only keep your eyes an' ears open an' don't be surprised if I don't follow my own rules.'

She nodded and suddenly whisked a handkerchief out from her skirt, then pretended to take it from behind the seat.

'Here it is. I found it, Ezra,' she called quite loudly.

Sewell straightened up to see the judge approaching behind him across the lawn.

''Mornin' to you, Judge. You're just the man I want to see now that I've done my one good deed for the day by helpin' Ellen find her handkerchief — if you'd call that dinky pen-wiper such a thing. Let's get along into the house out of the sun.'

Judge Brant nodded to Mrs. Bascom, and the three moved toward the house with some inconsequential remarks. In the hall, they encountered Basil talking earnestly to Dr. New, so Sewell suggested they make it a full conference. He led the way to King's den, where they all sat down comfortably.

'You seen Miss Hawley yet to-day?' the inspector addressed the doctor.

'Yes. She is still resting.'

'You mean unconscious? — Well, I hope it ain't as serious as Mrs. Bascom told me it might be?'

'Can't say definitely as yet — certainly not in its present stage.'

'Nothin' we can do to hurry things along a bit, then?'

'Not until she comes out of her coma.'

'Well, that's kind of unfortunate, as I think what I'm goin' to tell you has to do with her, an' I'd like to hear what she'd say about it. However, let me ask you, Judge, a question to start. — About that will, how does one of 'em have to be signed to make it legal?'

'It must be signed by the executor in the presence of three disinterested parties, each signing after him in the presence of the others. Is that what you mean?'

'Precisely. An' whatever's signed that way is a legal will, eh?'

'If the witnesses to the instrument know it was a will, yes, and providing there is no fraud or such contingency.'

'Supposin' there was a mistake. Supposin' there was two wills an' the wrong one got signed, all legal like.'

'That's not definite enough. Could you prove absolutely that it was an error?'

'Not positively, perhaps.'

'Then, if one was legally executed, it would stand, supposing your premise to be true. — Are you implying this is what happened in the case of King's will?'

'I think so, only what you say complicates matters, some. Here's the facts. Mrs. Bascom here has received a letter from one of the witnesses, one of the guests, you know, who signed his will. I'll read part of it to you.'

Sewell adjusted his glasses with care, took a letter from his pocket and read aloud:

> We assembled in his library. There were several papers on his desk, rather scattered about, some signed, others not. One of these latter he took up,

explaining it was his will and that we were to witness it.

He glanced it over a minute, then wrote his signature. Of course I never looked at what was written except to notice that it was in his own hand. He gave me the pen first, and I was just about to sign it when there was a terrible clatter outside and King exclaimed, 'Sounds like the local fire department in action.' We rushed to the window and threw it open, all leaning out to watch.

To us city people the apparatus was quaint and amusing, so we watched until it disappeared up the road. I remember King said, 'Just a brush fire and not dangerous if they're going in that direction, though it's a bit breezy for any sort of a fire to-day.'

When we went back to the desk, I picked up the paper that the wind had blown a little to one side, and signed it under his name. The others followed me.

That is all I remember. I've told it in as much detail as I could . . .

'The rest doesn't matter,' explained Sewell, folding up the paper again. 'One thing more, though. This witness showed her statement to another one of 'em before sendin' it, an' he agreed to every word. — What do you think of that, Judge?'

'I'd say it was perfectly legal,' he answered slowly.

'An' that's the one we found on King's desk after he was killed, the one makin' Miss Hawley his heiress. But I want to explain what I think really happened. There was another draft of a will. It was found among some papers on his desk in the house here. This one wasn't signed except by King, an' his writin' was blurred a bit as if somethin' had smeared over it before the ink was dry.

'Now that letter from the witness speaks of one or two interestin' points. There were several papers on the desk, some already signed. Again, there was a wind blowin' when the window was opened, interruptin' the signin'. The paper was blown to one side, see? Well, I guess you can figure out now what I'm drivin' at. I believe he'd signed one for the play, just a fake one meanin' to fake some witnesses for it. Then he signed the real one all right, but the wind blew it aside and this witness picked up the fake by mistake.'

'Ingenious — and plausible,' chimed in Judge Brant, bringing his hands together with a bang. 'I'm positive something like that must have occurred. Besides' — he turned to the others — 'remember King's expression when he first took up that will in the play? It was not wholly acting, I believe now. He was genuinely surprised and concerned for a moment, started to tear it up, then decided to go on with the play. I'm sure it was when he discovered his error.'

'Seems to bear out my theory, don't it?'

The judge's elation suddenly wilted. 'But, Sewell, this is all assumption. I don't see how it can be definitely proved.'

'You mean the signed one would stand in spite of this?'

'It would be hard to discredit it.'

'Why try to?' interrupted Basil with assurance. 'There's no reason for thinking he didn't mean to make Miss Hawley ——'

'Yes, there is. He told me about his plans just the day before and they included a bequest, but not the entire estate, to Miss Hawley,' said the judge.

'He may have changed his mind,' argued Basil stubbornly. 'It seems to me she has a perfect right to insist on the terms of that will.'

'Makes her quite an heiress — a right smart catch for some man, don't it?' interposed Sewell calmly, his eyes meeting Basil's squarely.

The latter's dropped quickly before this taunt, as he turned away with a gesture of bravado, but not before a flush stained his cheeks. No one seemed to notice this except Mrs. Bascom who shot a glance of approval at the inspector.

'Now, folks, I'm pretty sure of one thing — to get back to the murder part. Whoever did it must have known King pretty well to have had a motive an' he must have been right here on the spot. — I ain't exactly suspectin' one of you here an' I ain't so sure about Ruel, so it seems to me perhaps I'd better get along myself an' call on every one of the other guests present that night. It's kind of a long process, but it might lead to somethin'. What do you think?'

'I've wondered why you didn't do it before,' remarked Judge Brant dryly.

'Not I,' said Dr. New. 'It seems to me the thing to do now, but only as a sort of last gasp, when all else has failed. Of course, if you had some definite clue, it would be different.'

'That's the funny part, ain't it? There don't seem to be any of 'em to speak of. I ain't said much about it to you before, folks, but it's struck me as queer all along that the murderer's weapon hasn't turned up yet. That's really the only argument against its bein' one of the guests, see?'

'No, I don't. What do you mean?'

'Well, Doctor, it's this way. Say one of 'em killed King with some sort of knife. What could he do with it — where could he hide it? You were all searched, an' so was the barn. I even went over the ground outside to see if it was buried. It wasn't. Yet it must have been hidden mighty quick after the murder unless it was some one from outside who didn't stay after his deed.'

'What makes you think it wasn't such a person?' The question was Basil's.

'Kind of a hunch, I guess; also the fact that whoever did it must have known about King's plans for the play pretty well or he'd not have taken such a chance.'

'A pretty strong argument against Ruel, then, isn't it?'

'Just as strong against you — or Miss Hawley,' answered Sewell briefly, and Basil abruptly subsided again. 'Now, Doctor, let's just go over a point or two about the actual killin', if you don't mind. We know it was skillful an' sudden, struck right to the heart. I just wondered whether that was an easy thing to do — hit the heart, I mean — or did it require some special skill?'

'Not at all. The blow penetrated the thorax between the sternal ribs and ——'

'Hold on a bit. Thorax — I thought that was somethin' in the throat? Couldn't you explain a bit simpler?'

'Of course. The thorax is, in general, the part of the body between the neck and abdomen. A blow directed at the heart, if it struck in that region and hard enough, might pierce that organ or be deflected into it by one of the ribs. Any one might have done it quite easily, and death would be instantaneous with the stopping of the heart action.'

'I see. — Could a woman have done it, then?'

'Yes.'

They were silent for a moment after this reply, the judge's eyes automatically glancing at Mrs. Bascom, then quickly away again.

'Well, that's only as I'd figured it out myself, an' it don't change nothin'. — I guess that's about all this conference is good for to-day, unless some one's got a suggestion to make.'

'The only thing I can say is — let's have some action,' grumbled the judge. 'Things have been dragging on and on, but as far as I can see, we're no nearer finding the murderer. I don't doubt your sincerity in the least, Sewell, but I want to see King's murderer brought to justice.'

'No more'n I do. If you can suggest some way of actin', you've got me beat.'

'That's just it. You've covered the ground thoroughly without unearthing anything of value. Now, why not call in a little outside help? It may be rather late in the day, but ——'

Martha appeared in the doorway at this moment to interrupt with a telegram for the inspector. This he read slowly without change of expression, then got to his feet as he put the paper in his pocket.

'I guess I will, Judge. I know a man for the job, an' I'll send a wire to him right now by Pete who brought me this little business matter.'

He left the room quickly, and was back again before any one spoke.

'This man, name of Bartrum, ought to be here by to-morrow. Till then, I guess there's nothin' to do but hold on.'

'He's a good man?' asked Judge Brant earnestly. 'I know a smart detective myself, you see.'

'I guess he's smart as they make 'em,' cut in Sewell with finality.

'Good, I'll wait till after he comes, then I really must get back to my work. I've stayed longer than I had intended already.'

'I also,' added Dr. New. 'If it were not for Miss Hawley's condition I'd have gone before. But I hope she'll come around soon. If not, it would be better to place the case in the hands of another doctor and nurse, I'm afraid. It rather baffles me.'

'Well, I guess that'll be all right, gentlemen, an' thanks for stayin' so long. — Ellen B., anythin' I can do for you in the village, or take you there, perhaps?' drawled Sewell, his eyes meeting hers for a brief glance.

'No, thanks, Ezra. — But wait. I guess I will run down to the store a minute, if you can spare the time.'

'Certain sure. Got nothin' to do but wait for help now.'

Mrs. Bascom bustled up the stairs for a peep at Sylvia, then hurried out to Ezra, who was waiting on the piazza, chatting with the men. The car was started and, Mrs. Bascom at his side, it chugged down the road leaving a powdery cloud of dust behind it. Halfway to the village, Ezra stopped by the side of the road quite suddenly.

'Important errand, Ellen B.?' he grinned.

'Very. I need a spool of thread for the kitten to play with,' she replied with an answering smile. 'What was it you wanted to tell me, Ezra?'

'Right smart at takin' a hint, ain't you? — Well, now, seein' as we're partners in this business, I kind of thought you'd like to know about that telegram. Women are supposed to be curious, you know.'

'Not supposed to be — they are,' corrected Mrs. Bascom in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Well, I'll tell you, then. When Ruel had gone an' I sort of guessed where an' why, I called up the police of Boston an' told 'em to treat him well, give him all the help possible. They did all right, an' now they're wirin' me some more information. Guess they must have done some lookin' around, too, an' now here's this man Bartrum they're sendin' along to help. He knows all about that old case, see? They're sendin' some more dope to me an' it may be interestin', but I guess I can't wait for it to come. Incidentally, I didn't wire for him, as he's already comin' as near as I could make out their message.'

'So that's your famous detective?'

'Yep, though he may not know it! — But I declare I'd like to start somethin' right now — I've got to. I was thinkin' most all of last night how to lay a trap or somethin', but I'm scared to — yet.'

'You mean you really suspect one of those men here?'

Sewell nodded gravely, but declined to reveal his thoughts, and she did not press him.

'The knife — how about finding it suddenly? That might lure him into exposing himself,' suggested Mrs. Bascom eagerly.

'An' it only takes a woman that — ' he snapped his fingers loudly, 'to think of what took me most an hour! But it won't do, Ellen. If some one was after the knife in your house, he already knows you have it, or thinks you have, an' pretendin' to find it would only make him suspicious of a trap. No use doin' that.'

They were silent for a moment, then Mrs. Bascom spoke.

'Ezra, I've been wondering. Judge Brant seemed anxious to get hold of a detective — but one that he knew. The moment you spoke of Bartrum, he decided to leave. Do you suppose that has any significance?'

'I can suppose lots of things, Ellen, an' I'll admit I'd thought of that, but what's the use? Dr. New's leavin' too, an' both of 'em have suggested gettin' a detective, before. You can twist almost anythin' any one says or does into meanin' somethin' suspicious, when you haven't somethin' definite to go on. But I'm gettin' kind of discouraged with myself, Ellen,' he went on, his mouth drooping at the corners — 'kind of losin' faith in myself — about ready to give up.'

'Give up? Don't be a fool, Ezra Sewell. Don't admit you're stumped when you're not and you know it. Don't fish for compliments from me!'

The tartness of her words revived him like a tonic.

She had been almost too docile since her confession, but this was more like her old, vigorous self. Yet the flame was only temporary. When he egged her on again, she bit her lip and answered mildly, turning the subject.

'We've had time enough to get to the village and back. Better turn around so I can return and be with Sylvia. I'm worried about her, Ezra. — By the way, does Ruel know?'

'Not yet, though I kind of promised him a talk with her to-morrow. He's gettin' restless an' wants to see her. I guess you know why, Ellen.'

'Of course I do, the poor children.'

'Children? Now don't rub it in like that. Makes me feel like an old Methuselah, an' as to you — well, you ain't exactly decrepit yet — seems to *me*.'

With this remark, he started the car so abruptly that their heads jerked backward painfully. When she had recovered herself, Mrs. Bascom glanced at his whimsically stern face with its eyes held straight to the front. It was a dubious compliment, perhaps, but coming from him so unexpectedly it had taken her off guard. A reply was impossible as he backed and headed for King's house, so she remained thoughtfully silent. When he stopped to let her out at the door, however, she leaned close to make him hear as she gave a parting word of advice.

'Keep Ruel away for to-day, at least. Tell him some message from Sylvia. Make up a strong one. You'd know what to say!'

Then she hurried into the house, leaving Ezra staring after her in open-mouthed alarm.

He'd know what to say —— Now what did she mean by that? The answer worried him even more than the other questions on his mind as he returned to the jail and spent an hour energetically sweeping up and tidying the office. His message to Ruel seemed sufficiently personal to pacify him for a time, however, especially when Ezra hinted it was Sylvia's own desire to rest and be at her best when they should next meet.

Ezra's housekeeping duties over, he was about to go outside again when the telephone rang. It was Mrs. Bascom, who spoke in a low, hurried voice.

'I want you to come here after lunch. Take the back road and bring Dr. Smith from the village. Be here by, but not before, two o'clock. I'll signal to you.'

With that the receiver clicked silent, and Ezra hung up. So Ellen was at work again, eh? — She wanted the village doctor — why? Obviously to see Sylvia. Again, why? And her abrupt manner ——

'Ruel,' called Ezra, 'do you know any funny stories? If you do, tell me one quick so I can stop mullin' over foolish ideas like I've got now.'

But Ruel did not reply. He was asleep.

At the appointed hour, Sewell led the doctor toward King's house from across the orchard back of the barn. He consulted his watch to be exact and scanned the house for some sign from Ellen. As they approached cautiously, Mrs. Bascom appeared in the kitchen doorway and beckoned for them to hurry, which they did.

'Dr. Smith,' she said as she led them toward the hall, 'I want you to look at Miss Hawley. I've been thinking back over her condition and I'm not satisfied, somehow, with Dr. New's diagnosis. He's supposed to be a fine nerve specialist, but — well, I'm not sure it's all nerves. The three men have gone for the mail.'

'Tell me what you think,' said the doctor, taking his cue from her and not wasting time by idle questions to satisfy his curiosity at this mysterious summons.

Briefly she recounted Sylvia's symptoms of a nervous breakdown, omitting the reasons for it, and Dr. New's gloomy predictions, then opened the door to Sylvia's room. Sewell peeped in, but did not enter, leaving that to Mrs. Bascom and the doctor. It was not modesty that held him back, rather it was the realization that now was a splendid chance to search the absent men's rooms as he had been planning to do.

Of necessity it was rather a hasty search, yet it was not unproductive. He entered the judge's room first, as it was the nearest. Here everything was neat and precise as he had expected; toilet articles arranged and orderly, clothes hung in the closet, shoes in a row on the floor. A leather portfolio lay open on the table, containing a sheaf of documents. One of them caught Ezra's eye and he slipped it out. It was a half-sheet with the typed words — 'Prisoner No. 24578.' This he tucked into his pocket.

The doctor's room came next, a decided contrast in neatness. A suit of clothes lay mussed in a chair, a medical book on the floor, while the bureau top was a jumble of toilet articles. Two white pills lay untidily on the carpet before the bureau, and Ezra neatly picked them up. A handbag in the closet disclosed part of a doctor's kit, a stethoscope, some bottles of pills and liquids, and a roll or two of bandages. As Ezra bent over this he sniffed once, smiled to himself, then nodded and left the room.

Clothes for all occasions filled Basil's room, each rather carefully hung up or put away in drawers, but one thing in his almost empty suit-case pursed Ezra's lips into a soundless whistle. Tucked into a side pocket next a flask, was a jimmy and a revolver! This latter he unloaded, dropping the shells into his pocket, then, hearing footsteps in the hall, hurried back toward Sylvia's room.

The doctor and Mrs. Bascom stood there looking for him, the former rather grim, the latter horrified, yet triumphant.

'How is she?' Sewell addressed the doctor, but his eyes were fixed on Mrs. Bascom's.

'She will regain consciousness in a short time now.'

'An' she'll be clear in her mind, do you think?'

'Absolutely. She'll only remember that she's been asleep, probably. I mean she will not know why she's been unconscious for so long.'

'But you do?'

'I do!'

If he had expected to create a sensation by these words, the doctor failed, for Sewell, still staring at Mrs. Bascom, merely nodded as if the news was no surprise to him — was only a confirmation of some idea of his own!

CHAPTER XVII

EZRA TAKES A NAP

Mrs. Bascom stared from Ezra to Dr. Smith incredulously. She had anticipated the doctor's statement as to Sylvia's condition would startle the inspector, but instead he took it calmly, did not even ask for details as if he were already aware of them.

'Ezra Sewell,' she exploded at last, 'do you mean to stand there, not even interested enough to ask what was wrong with her? You act as if ——'

Sewell stopped her with a commanding gesture for silence, listened intently, then spoke quickly and sharply.

'That's the judge's car comin' back. Go down an' keep 'em from lookin' out back until we get away, Ellen. Mum's the word till I can call you up an' explain.'

Seizing the doctor by the arm, he hurried him down the stairs and out the back way, pausing until he heard Mrs. Bascom's voice addressing the men at the front of the house, then urging the astonished physician out through the barn and thus away from it by the orchard. Not until they had safely gained Ezra's car, parked on the back road, did the latter speak.

'Doctor, I guess you must think I'm actin' like a crazy loon, but you'll have to trust me a bit. I'll just say this. Ellen's a right smart woman, an' between her an' me, before another day's over, things will be all straightened out clear. Just you be patient an' keep your mouth shut tight on all this. — Take my car an' drive back. Leave it at the jail. I won't need it for a while.'

'But, Ez, don't you even want to know about Miss Hawley? She's been ——'

'Never mind now. Think I could guess pretty accurate myself! We'll talk that over later on. Now, git!'

Sewell turned abruptly away, retracing his steps toward the barn. As they had left it a moment ago, he had been careful to see that the French window they used was not latched behind them. Now he stepped through it again into King's workshop. Withdrawing a clean handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped off the hinges and lock of the rear window, then performed the same operation on the one at the side of the room near where the guests had sat. This done, he rolled the cloth into a ball, wrapped it in a piece of paper, and retraced his steps to the road, setting off toward the village at a brisk walk.

Fifteen minutes later he called Mrs. Bascom on the jail telephone and seemed gratified by the apparent calmness of her tone.

'Ellen, just answer yes or no to what I ask you, see? — Now, can any one hear what I'm sayin' except you? — Good. Then here's what I'd suggest doin'. Keep *every one* away from Sylvia, even Martha. Lock yourself in with her if necessary, but try not to arouse suspicion an', whatever you do, don't let 'em know if she comes to. Otherwise, try to act natural, an' if you ever played a part, play that one for all you're worth.

'Nothin' will happen to-night — that I'll guarantee. I'll be up there if I can, but don't go out of your way to talk to me, an' don't leave your room to-night — not for anythin'. — Understand all that? — I'm bankin' on you a lot, Ellen B. — That's all.'

He hung up the receiver abruptly, next calling Dr. Smith and listening gravely to his diagnosis of Sylvia's condition.

'Think she'll be able to stand a little talkin' an' excitement by to-morrow? — That's good. — Well, I'm askin' you to do somethin' else for me now, Doctor. Pete here will be over shortly with a handkerchief of mine. It's kind of oily. Could you soak it out somehow an' find out what kind of oil it is? — Fine. — I'll pick you up to-morrow mornin' about nine o'clock, an' we'll go up to King's house, where I guess everythin' can be settled right prompt. See you then.'

Pete had been listening to this conversation, so received the handkerchief with a silent nod, as Sewell beckoned him to follow to Ruel's cell where he paused outside, speaking quite briskly.

'Son, it's all over but the shoutin' now, I hope, though there may be quite some of that.'

'You mean — you know who killed King?'

'Yep. But I ain't tellin' you or any one else — yet. Now here's what I came to say. I've still got to prove it an' you've got to help me. You an' Pete here have an all-night job ahead of you. Now take this calm, Ruel. The truth is, Sylvia's comin' around all right, but she's been pretty bad. Some one went an' doped her, drugged her to keep her mouth shut.'

'Doped — Sylvia?' Ruel shouted, shaking the bars as if to wrench them from the masonry. 'Who? Why? Let me out of here, Ez. I'll ——'

'Shut up!' commanded Sewell sharply. 'I told you she was all right now an' I also said I needed your help. If you can't control yourself, I'll say no more — leave you here an' get some one as is willin' to act sensible.'

This threat sobered Ruel at once, but he gripped the bars until his knuckles showed white.

'Ellen B. helped to discover that, an' she's lookin' after Sylvia now.'

'God bless Ellen B.,' muttered Ruel fervently.

'You said it, son. Now, then, there's nothin' to worry about — absolutely nothin'. To-night Pete here will let you out of that cell. You an' him sneak up to King's house, an' don't get seen doin' it either. When it's dark, you hide in the bushes on this side of it, Pete on the farther side. There's a man in the house who might try to sneak away, though I don't think so. However, it's up to you two not to let him — to see that no one leaves durin' the night — no one.'

The men nodded, Pete with apparent languor, though his eyes sparkled with interest, Ruel with set jaw and tense muscles. Sewell glanced at the latter quizzically as he remarked, 'Guess no one will get away on your side, Ruel! — An' incidentally, I guess these are your last hours in jail, so make the most of 'em. — Get along on that errand now, Pete.'

When the latter had gone, Sewell went into the office, took out his little box of clues, tied them in a neat bundle, and stowed them back in the safe again.

Next he seated himself at the desk to write. There were long pauses for thought and many lines were rewritten several times. At last he sank back in his chair, read the result of his labors twice, then tore the pages into bits. Thus Sewell marshaled his facts and arguments in preparation for the following day.

A telephone call to the judge made an appointment for the latter to come to the jail at half-past seven that evening, then Sewell set about preparing supper, whistling and humming quite light-heartedly.

Prompt to the minute, Judge Brant's car drew up before the jail and he bustled into the office, smoking a long fragrant cigar.

'Here I am, Sewell. Have one?' He offered a cigar to the inspector as he settled down in the empty chair, drawn up into the light of the lamp.

'No, thanks, Judge. I ain't used to highfalutin smokes. A corncob is more suitin' to me, an' don't take my mind off things by makin' me think how much I ought to be enjoyin' the smoke.'

The judge chuckled. 'Well, Inspector, is this another of your conferences?'

'Yep, sort of. More talkin', Judge, but perhaps you'll get some actin' for a change to-morrow. — How's everythin' up to the house?'

'About the same. Mrs. Bascom had a headache and is staying in her room; Miss Hawley is still asleep. It is certainly unfortunate — her condition, just at this time.'

'Ain't it? — especially when she might be able to clear up things — about the will business, for instance.'

Judge Brant nodded skeptically. He doubted this statement, but did not bother to deny it. His face, lighted by the full glare of the lamp, showed lines of worry, appeared weary and puzzled as if his thoughts were troubling him, and his eyes rather avoided Sewell's.

'I suppose this case ain't been run accordin' to detective methods, exactly,' said the latter, clearing his throat noisily. 'I'll admit I ain't a go-gettin' sleuth like in King's stories, but to me, it ain't been the kind of thing such methods could apply to, if you know what I mean. For instance, there's been too few clues. Again, there's been too much of this keepin' things secret, not offerin' information like people ought to, if they are anxious to clear up a mystery.'

'To whom do you refer?' asked the judge rather absently, as if only half interested in Sewell's words.

'You!'

'Me? I — I don't understand!' His interest no longer wavered. His eyes, narrowed and searching, fixed upon Sewell's, his cigar spilled ashes unnoticed upon his immaculately brushed clothes.

'About King. Why didn't you tell me what you knew, Judge?'

'What I knew?' echoed the latter, but his face flushed with the effort to keep his voice calm.

For reply, Ezra fumbled in his pocket and placed upon the table between them the slip of paper that he had abstracted from the judge's portfolio. The latter glanced down at it, unable to conceal a start of surprise.

'I don't see what you are driving at, Sewell. I suppose you found that in my room. Well, it's just a — a case in which I was interested.'

'I'm kind of interested in it too — about King, alias Jameson, eh?'

The judge's bluster, like a pricked bubble, vanished. 'You — you know that?'

'An' a good deal more. An' I repeat, why didn't you tell me?'

The judge stared incredulously at the inspector, but this time his eyes did not waver under the other's scrutiny. He became intent, nervous, as he leaned forward, his fingers crushing the paper into a ball.

'You're insinuating I had something else to conceal — some knowledge of the murder, I suppose? I swear to you it's not true. I had a reason for keeping this knowledge from you, but not the one you're imputing.'

'I guess I believe you, Judge, but tell me about it,' replied Sewell, knocking out the ashes from his pipe and preparing to refill it.

'How much do you know?' countered the judge.

'What the police records an' newspapers told.'

'Then there is a little more I can add.' There was a distinct relief in his tone now. 'I found it out only yesterday when I was in Boston. That number in King's dressing-gown pocket — when I first saw it I felt sure I ought to recognize it, yet couldn't. It's been puzzling me. Yesterday I remembered certain private documents King had given me some weeks ago. They were kept separate from his other papers, so I had almost forgotten them. When I looked them over, I found a letter addressed to me which I had opened before and put aside. It contained an instruction that in case any peculiar accident should occur to him, I was to go to a certain safety-deposit box in a bank. This was to be done only in case I should think it necessary.

'I had not understood his instructions at the time, and he refused to explain them. That's why they made little impression on me. But the safety-deposit box number was the same as that on the slip — his prison number.

'I obtained the specified paper, found it was his confession of his imprisonment. But in it he denied all the charges against him, disclaimed any knowledge of either the murder or the underhanded business of his partner. Two other facts were important. First, he admitted learning, by chance, where his partner had hidden some of his illicit gains. There was no way of returning them or making restitution, so he said nothing about it at the trial. He obtained them when he was released, and made a fresh start. Part of the funds he used for this purpose, but later paid them back scrupulously, devoting the entire fund to charity — to helping others in distress, and so on. His accounting of it is all there, and it was his moral restitution, I suppose.

'The second fact bears on his death, or so it seems to me. He stated that for some months he had been receiving slips of paper with his prison number on them — nothing more. He feared this was blackmail and left this explanation, obviously in case — well, in case of his sudden death through other than natural causes.'

'That corroborates things pretty well, especially

Ellen B.'s ideas. An' it was just like him to go an' choose that special number for his lock box. — Interestin' — kinks of human nature, ain't they? But why didn't you tell me?'

'The revelation of his past stunned me. It was like defaming the dead to bring it all to light again. I knew I should tell you, but I hesitated, tried to believe it would not be necessary. Oh, I might as well tell the whole truth. I feared you would not be discreet, Sewell. Frankly, I did not have much confidence in you, feared you might let it all become known unnecessarily, so meant to get a detective of whom I was more certain. I apologize, sincerely. I've misjudged you and ——'

'Never mind that part. It's done no real harm, lettin' some others think I'm a lazy sort of fool too.'

'You mean you know who is guilty?'

'I do. Bein' a good listener comes in handy sometimes, Judge, an' often words do speak louder than actions. But I'm wanderin' from the road. You haven't told any one else?'

'Not a soul. And you? Must the world be told?'

'Not if I can help it. You seem to forget he was my friend, too, an' the same to lots of others hereabouts.' Sewell's words were sharp and indignant, but only for the moment. 'Well, Judge, that clears up your end quite satisfactory. Maybe I can count on you to help as well as be — er — discreet, seein' as we understand each other, eh?'

'Absolutely. If there is anything I can do ——'

'Seems to me I've heard you say them words before,' remarked Ezra pointedly, 'but this time I'll take 'em at face value an' trust you've told me everythin'. Just forget about what we've been sayin', see? If any one asks you why I called you down here, say — well, tell 'em it was one of my usual blunderin' conferences!'

'I'll play up, Sewell. But who is the person you suspect? Do I know him?'

'Certain sure, but I ain't quite ready to tell you — yet. You might be more help not knowin', see? But I figure it won't be long before you do. This much I'll say — it's some one as is in King's house now!'

'Then why don't you arrest him?'

'Don't worry. I will when the time's ripe. Look here, Judge, I've got two things you can do to help. The first is, sleep light to-night an' keep one ear an' eye open. I don't want any one leavin' that house to-night. The other request is simpler — drive me up to the house now for a spell.'

'Of course, I will — and that answers for both,' nodded the judge, his whole attitude having been completely revolutionized. 'You may be sure I'll watch carefully too. Ready to go right away?'

Ezra pocketed his pipe without knocking out the smoking ashes, took up his battered felt hat, then blew out the light and followed the judge to his waiting car. He nodded to Pete, who was loitering on the curb, gossiping with one of the villagers, then they drove off in silence. Yet, when Basil Stacey and Dr. New arose to greet them from King's piazza, Sewell became even more loquacious than usual. After they had talked for some time, he suggested they play a game of cards.

'You needn't look so darned shocked,' he added with a chuckle at their startled expressions. 'I'm human, an' it's good to relax with a game once in a while. Sometimes I've wished we had more company down at the jail for that reason, 'cause two can't play much, an', besides, I know all the ways Pete cheats! To-night I kind of feel like breakin' out a bit, throwin' over the traces for relief, you might say, seein' as the detective will be takin' over my job to-morrow, I guess.'

When they saw his suggestion was made in earnest, they agreed to it readily, starting for the smoking-room to set up a table and cards. As they stepped toward the door, Sewell touched Basil's arm and motioned for him to hang back after the others.

'Stacey,' whispered the inspector authoritatively as he loudly knocked out the ashes from his pipe as an excuse for delaying, 'watch out to-night. One of those men may try to leave. See that he doesn't quit the house, understand?'

'You think that ——'

'I'm givin' orders, not answerin' questions, an' if you know what's good for you, do as I say. Play up, now.'

Before the surprised Stacey could speak again, Sewell pushed him into the hall toward the smoking-room.

'What shall it be, gentlemen?' asked the doctor as he shuffled the cards.

'Know whist? It's kind of takin' advantage of you, my bein' the champion of the county, but it's about the only game I know.'

The others assented and the evening passed quickly. Ezra proved his boast convincingly, the while flavoring the conversation with stories and sly jokes so that no one had time to revert to the mystery. A little after eleven, he stretched, yawned frankly, and pushed back his chair.

'You night owls can play as long as you want, but I'm goin' to bed.'

'Want me to drive you down, Sewell?' asked Judge Brant.

'No. Walkin' will make me all the sleepier. Thanks for the game.' He smiled and jingled some newly acquired silver in his pocket.

At the doorway he addressed the doctor over his shoulder.

'By the way, do you think there's a chance of Miss Hawley bein' up to-morrow when the detective comes? I'm expectin' him by the first train.'

'Rather doubtful, I'm afraid, Sewell.'

'Wish she might. There'll be questions to ask.'

'Well, Mrs. Bascom said she was still — er — asleep when I stopped at her door. That doesn't look very hopeful.'

Sewell nodded and beckoned. While he had been speaking, he stepped into the hall, the doctor naturally following him. Now they were out of sight of the others and Ezra leaned close to whisper in his ear.

'Can't explain now, but I want those two men watched. Don't let either of 'em slip out of the house to-night. It's important.'

Dr. New grabbed at Sewell to restrain him for a question, but the latter eluded him and, placing a finger on his lips, hurried down the hall, calling back aloud as he stood in the open door, 'Good-night, gentlemen, an' thanks for a mighty pleasant an' profitable evenin'.'

This remark was largely for the benefit of his two watchers, Ruel and Pete, who should be on duty by now. As Ezra walked toward the road, he glanced sharply about for them, but neither was visible, so he nodded contentedly to himself, walked away out of sight of the house, then cut into the field and circled back until he was in front of it again. Here he squatted in the grass near a tree and waited, his eyes fixed on the lighted hall.

A half-hour passed, and he began to nod gently, bringing his head up with a jerk every now and then. After repeating this painful process several times, he jabbed his thumb into his ribs viciously and muttered, 'Here you, Ezra, wake up. You're a fine specimen of a guard, you are.'

He glanced quickly at the house again. All the upper rooms were dark, but the hall light burned brightly and a reflected light on the bushes at one side showed the smoking-room was still illumined.

'Hump! Wonder if they're takin' my remark serious an' are goin' to play all night?'

He chuckled, and looked at his radium-dialed watch.

'Gettin' on to midnight. I never should have stayed up so late last night. It ain't good trainin' for guard duty, leastwise not for an old man like me.'

With a yawn he got stiffly to his feet, knowing it was too dark to be seen from the house, stretched his arms and legs luxuriously, then began to chuckle to himself heartily. A moment later he slapped his leg softly, then slunk away in the general direction of the village.

Twenty minutes later he let himself into the dark jail and slipped into his room, undressing without turning on the light. As he sank back between the sheets of his bed, he snickered again.

'Yep, you're deliberately desertin' your post, Ezra Sewell, but no one will ever know it an' you've earned a good night's rest. Besides, ain't it a sign of a big man who can get others to do his work for him? — Ha! I'd like to be a skeeter on the wall of that room so I could see those three men, each watchin' the other an' suspectin' him! — As to Ruel, it'll do him good, havin' a night out, an' it'll keep him out of mischief, playin' watch-dog hero. An' Pete — well, it's time that lazy critter earned his salt. Yes, you take a good snooze, Ezra, an' to-morrow ——'

The rest was lost in a yawn, quickly followed by rhythmic breathing and a whistling snore.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WHOLE TRUTH

When Ruel and Pete entered the jail the following morning at seven o'clock as Sewell had instructed, the latter had breakfast ready and waiting. His invitation to partake of it needed no repetition.

'Peaceful night, eh? I didn't see a soul go out, did you?' the inspector questioned them as they sat down at the table.

'Nary a sign of one,' said Pete.

'Nor I,' reported Ruel. 'Where were you, Ez?'

'Oh, I circled back a bit after I left the house,' responded the inspector vaguely.

'Those three men sat up half the night playing cards. I could watch them through the window,' added Ruel as he sipped his coffee.

'I thought they might. Well, stock up, boys, an' then rest a bit till we meet Detective Bartrum on the train an' go up to King's.'

'Rest? Not I, Ez. Do we all go together?'

'Yep, that is, providin' you'll obey orders an' behave,' nodded Sewell. 'An' for my part, I'll promise to clean up the mystery.'

Ruel's eyes pleaded for more information, but he stifled his questions when the inspector shook his head.

Breakfast over, the three men made short work of cleaning and putting away the dishes, then Ezra set about tidying up the already neat room. It proved a rather futile task. Ruel kept walking about nervously, moving a chair as soon as Ezra had carefully straightened it or absently picking up some object and replacing it in the wrong spot. At first, Sewell merely grunted and hastened to set them to rights again, but at length he gave it up when it appeared to be rapidly becoming a sort of endless game of checkers — a series of moves and jumps without purpose.

He sat down to smoke, but Ruel's nervousness had proved infectious. His pipe would not draw well, puffed out ashes unexpectedly; the smoke bit his tongue. He glanced repeatedly at his watch. At last, he got to his feet, procured the clues from the safe, and started for the door. Here he collided violently with Ruel, who apologized in a breathless tone.

'Take it easy,' admonished Sewell kindly. 'You might expend some of your superfluous energy fillin' the radiator with water, if you've a mind to, son.'

This humble duty accomplished, Ruel sprang into the seat beside Ezra, Pete in the rear, and they drove quickly to the station. Of course the train was late, but at last it puffed into sight, tooted, and panted to a stop at the small platform. Two men got down after the conductor and turned toward the main street. Both were natives of the village.

Ezra looked up and down the platform expectantly, but the train pulled out again, and Bartrum, the detective, had not arrived.

'Guess he slipped up somehow,' explained Sewell, bolstering up his own disappointment. 'I'd kind of figured on his help a bit, but with a little changin' of plans, we can get along without him, all right. Just as well, maybe, at that.'

He took this mishap philosophically, but the ride to King's house was a silent one as he appeared to be thinking seriously. They picked up Dr. Smith on the way, but he, too, sensed Ezra's abstraction, so remained mute after a friendly greeting. When they drew up before the house, Sewell gave a low command to his henchmen.

'We'll meet in King's den. Ruel, stay by the door; Pete, by the window. You, Doctor, watch out for any tricks.'

They entered the hall just as Mrs. Bascom appeared at the top of the stairs and looked questioningly at Ezra. He shook his head in the negative, and she disappeared silently.

A little pile of luggage — four suit-cases, a brief-case, and a small handbag — lay on the floor near the hatrack. These Ezra recognized as belonging to Judge Brant and Dr. New. One of them he picked up and handed to Basil, whispering, 'Take it to the den an' kind of put it out of sight. Wait there.'

His order obeyed, Sewell called out briskly, 'Hey there, anybody to home?'

A door opened somewhere above and Judge Brant appeared in the upper hall. Dr. New came almost simultaneously from the rear hall. Each seemed on the point of asking an eager question when he noticed the other and stopped.

''Mornin', gentlemen. Have a good game after I left?'

'We did play quite a while,' yawned the judge, glancing sidewise at Dr. New.

'Sure. Gettin' ready to leave, were you?' He nodded toward the luggage.

'Temporarily,' answered Dr. New. 'Judge Brant offered me a ride and we both have to go for the day, at least, so decided it would be a good chance to take most of our things with us. We thought that as soon as this new man had asked any questions he might want to put, we'd be off. Of course we'll come back, if necessary.'

'Guess that man ain't comin' — just yet.'

'No? That's unfortunate, as I really must be in town by noon at the latest.'

'Oh, that's all right. I think we can fix things so nobody much need wait around longer. But how about your patient, Doctor?'

'Miss Hawley? I was going to speak to you about her. There's really nothing I can do that your village doctor can't attend to quite well. Of course, it's an interesting case and I shall hope to follow it closely, but I can leave directions and all that quite easily.'

'I brought him along, thinkin' he might prove handy,' said Ezra. 'Glad I did now. Then you think her condition ain't really serious?'

'I hope not. She's still unconscious, you know,' he added for the benefit of the other doctor. 'She hasn't been able to speak and explain her symptoms, so for that reason I may be mistaken in my diagnosis.'

'Glad to hear you say so, Doctor,' Sewell gravely answered. 'Where's Stacey?'

'Around somewhere. Shall I find him?'

'Wish you would, Judge, an' bring him along to the den.'

Ezra did not seem to notice the judge's gesture which sought a private word with him. As soon as he had gone on his errand, Sewell moved away toward the den and Dr. New seized his opportunity to remark in a low tone, 'We played cards rather late, and I — er — followed your directions.'

'Good. No trouble?'

'None, though both men seemed keyed up, watchful and nervous, rather furtive at times. But what does it mean? This detective ——'

'Far as I know he'll be along sometime, but I guess it don't make any difference. I don't need him after all.'

'What? You mean ——'

'Yep, I know who killed King, how an' why,' drawled the inspector. 'Ah, here's Stacey. How are you, Basil?'

The latter nodded as he entered the den with the judge. He seemed surprised by the cordiality of Sewell's tone. Then he noticed Ruel, rather tense and silent, by the door and greeted him with an effort at heartiness.

'Glad to see you again, Ruel. Out on parole or — well, what?'

'For good,' answered Sewell succinctly. 'Now we're all here, let's get down to horses an' sheep. No, hold on a bit. Ellen B. ain't here. I'll call her.'

'Too bad Miss Hawley can't join the group,' added Judge Brant.

Ezra disregarded this remark, disappearing into the hall. They heard him call out to Mrs. Bascom. As he passed Ruel in returning to the room, he whispered, 'Hold hard, son, she's comin',' then walked to the desk, where he stood staring silently at Dr. New. The latter returned his gaze questioningly, but his lips twitched slightly as the silence remained unbroken, save for Mrs. Bascom's advancing footsteps, curiously slow and halting.

It was one of those peculiarly electric moments when, without a word spoken, every one seemed to feel a tenseness in the air, to expect something neither definite nor understandable. Mrs. Bascom's approach seemed somehow significant, ominous, yet there was no reason for such a feeling. The doctor's eyes shifted nervously toward the doorway; every one's gaze, except Sewell's, riveted there.

Mrs. Bascom appeared in the doorway, gravely paused, half turned about, held out her hand, and Sylvia stepped to her side! The latter was dressed in a becoming frock and her face, though a trifle wan, was flushed with excitement.

Ruel started forward eagerly, but after one step, drew himself back to his post. For once, hard as it was, he obeyed orders, though his eyes spoke to Sylvia's even more expressively than his actions could have done. In silence Mrs. Bascom led her to a chair, holding her hand encouragingly as she stood beside her. Dr. New's face became suddenly pallid as he leaned forward, winking to clear his vision.

'Miss Hawley,'' he muttered in an unnatural tone, 'what are you doing — up — like this? I thought ——'

'Yes, your diagnosis was wrong, eh, Doctor? She came to quick enough once we discovered what ailed her — dope!'

'Dope?' The doctor whirled toward Ezra. He was now completely master of himself again through an heroic effort, his expression one of incredulity. 'You mean to insinuate I drugged her?'

'She was your patient.'

'But who told you that — said she was drugged?'

'I did,' answered Dr. Smith levelly. 'She was not only doped with medicine, but had been given a hypodermic injection, cleverly concealed under the band of her wristwatch.' Their eyes met, Dr. Smith's frankly accusing and hard, Dr. New's snapping with anger.

'Then you're a poor specimen of a medical man!' sneered the latter. 'The idea is sheer idiocy. Why should I —— But wait. It's just possible I might have confused those pills. I happened to have two unlabeled bottles, though of different shapes, and one held a mild drug. Of course I may have seized the wrong one in a hurry ——'

'And I might requote your epithet on that score, Doctor! Besides, who gave the hypodermic?' Again their eyes met, and this time there was anger in both pairs.

'Look here, Sewell,' blustered Dr. New, deliberately turning his back on his accuser, 'do you mean to stand there and let me be insulted by a mere country quack?'

'Yep, an' to add a country constable's insult, let me expand the accusation of druggin' to breakin' with the intent to steal, an' murder!'

Dr. New sprang toward the inspector, swinging his clenched fist back to strike, only to have it seized firmly by the other physician. His eyes blazed, and his breath whistled through his compressed lips as he tugged to free his hand. But the physical action seemed to calm him, to make him realize the uselessness of this act. With a gasp and a shudder, his tenseness relaxed, and Dr. Smith released his hand, though remaining alertly near him.

'That calls for an explanation, Sewell,' cried the doctor. His voice bit harshly even as it trembled with rage, and his face blanched to a pasty gray.

'An' it don't call in vain, you damned sneakin' murderer — you skunk in sheep's clothin',' snapped the inspector, loosing control of himself for that one outburst, then speaking with a quick, incisive tone that fell in unfamiliar cadence from his lips. 'I'm only too glad to oblige you.'

Sewell whirled on his heel, crossed over to a chair near Ruel, seized the small bag from under it, and set it upon the desk. As he began to speak, he opened it, then drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and placed them beside it.

'You've been lookin' for action, have you? Well, now you'll get it. You killed King, an' this is how.

'Knowin' the secret of his past, you tried out blackmail — just sendin' him that number on pieces of paper. As his doctor an' friend, you watched him, but he didn't seem scared. You hated him, an' that night your chance came for revenge. You took it.

'You sneaked out to the barn while they were makin' plans for the play an' listened. When they'd gone, you oiled the doors, or windows, located the creaks in the floor to avoid, an' tucked that slip of paper in the pocket of his dressing-gown. Bravado, eh, but 'twas kind of a fool thing to do. Then you took the paper-knife from his desk in the house here an' got your rubber gloves handy.

'In the darkness of the play, you took a seat right near the window, crept out of it, walked along the wall so as not to leave foot marks, an' came in by that other one, so nicely curtained. Just after Ruel acted his part, you killed King an' sneaked back. It was easy that way — even simple to make some alibi if you'd been missed, 'cause it was dark an' besides you were King's friend. In the confusion afterwards, you locked the window, an' threw the knife down the chute where you could get it again later. But you didn't get the chance or know Sylvia had fallen there, through your leavin' the cover off.

'You thought you played the game clever — stayin', when urged, to watch an' cover your trail in case anythin' went wrong. But nothin' did at first. A country fool of an inspector took charge. He did nothin' but talk, an' was easy to bluff an' flatter. You were safe. Everythin' went fine. Others were suspected, others blundered, but never you, oh, no! Then somethin' turned up that was puzzlin'. The knife disappeared from the chute, an' no one seemed to know about it. Other little things went queer, too — the robbery, the way Sylvia acted about the will an' the money you coveted, but couldn't get. You got a wee bit nervous, an' decided to stick around, make sure to cover your tracks, eh?

'Then luck played into your hands. You learned by eavesdroppin' that Mrs. Bascom had the knife, but had kept it a secret. You guessed it was in her house an' blundered outright — tryin' to recover it. You didn't find it, 'cause I beat you to it. Still nothin' happened, nothin' tangible. You got a shock, though, learnin' Sylvia had told Mrs. Bascom a lot more that night after you thought she was asleep. You knew she had almost caught you in King's workshop just before the play. Perhaps she knew somethin' else — too much!

'You decided to shut her up until you could make a clean get-away. What more natural than a nervous breakdown — a coma? A few drugs would do it. Safe, eh? But it didn't work, you see. Murder — druggin' — breakin' — all proved to a T.'

Sewell paused to regain his breath after this long speech.

Dr. New had been watching him steadily, his face hard and devoid of emotional expression, but there was a gleam of real fear in his eyes that he could not disguise. Steel himself as he had for part of these accusations, a recital of all his movements and reactions so logically and clearly in such an assured tone came near to breaking his control.

'A fine story — very ingenious. But such beautifully fabricated deductions cannot be proved, Sewell.'

'No? Take 'em one by one, then, an' let Judge Brant here see what he thinks of the evidence. Supposin' I was to list 'em off this way.

'First, you were seen listenin' to the rehearsal. Second, you used castor oil on those doors, havin' some handy in this bag here. Oh, yes, that's been tested an' proved when I wiped some of it off, you see. Third, it was known where you sat near the window. Clever as you were, some of the guests had senses an' used 'em too. You forgot the women might get excited an' want to hold your hand! That's how they found you gone.

'Fourth, you were seen at the window durin' the confusion when you locked it an' also when you skipped out to get rid of the knife. Fifth, you tried to throw suspicion on others an' acted noble as if you wanted to help, only to find a way to hinder. Sixth, you broke into Mrs. Bascom's house to get the knife.'

Sewell took out a pair of rubber gloves from the doctor's bag.

'Careless-like, you broke her vial of musk when searchin' in her room — got some on your gloves. Musk's pretty penetratin' — you can still smell it on 'em. An', incidentally, probably these are the same ones you used when you killed King, eh? Seventh, you drugged Sylvia Hawley to close her mouth effectively. I picked up a couple of them dope pills in your room. Eighth, you were preparin' to run away an' never come back.

'How do I know? 'Cause you received a letter from a steamship company yesterday an' they told me it contained a ticket to South America when I telephoned them. — How's that for a few clinchers, Judge?'

The latter could not speak as his cheeks puffed crimson with emotion, but he nodded emphatically.

'Oh, yes, an' the motive,' continued Sewell as the doctor moistened his lips to speak. 'The dead past they tell about ain't so dead but what its ghosts can rise up. We know King's story. We also know his innocence an' *your guilt* — your connection with his partner, Fox, an' his gang of smugglers, drug peddlers, petty criminals — even his death!'

Dr. New's bravado crumpled suddenly under this last battery of accusations. He slumped against the desk as if for support, his head lolling to one side, his hands nervously plucking and fumbling at his coat. One hand darted into his pocket and up to his mouth suddenly.

With a cry, Sewell sprang forward, but Dr. Smith acted even quicker. He seized the back of New's jaws with one hand, his throat with the other. The one made him open his mouth, the other prevented him from swallowing until Sewell had roughly snatched out the pill which lay on the guilty man's tongue.

'None of that. Poison's a cheap way of cheatin' justice an' too easy for the likes of you.' As he spoke, Sewell snapped on the handcuffs. 'Of course, that's a confession of your guilt, but not all the one you're goin' to give.'

'Oh, I confess — to both of them,' snarled the doctor impotently.

'King's an' his partner Fox's deaths, eh? Well, I guess we'd better have that in writin' even if we have got enough witnesses. Judge, how about it?'

For answer, Judge Brant strode to the desk, seized paper and pen, and began to write.

His act broke the spell of tenseness that had held the others silent in its grasp. There was a rustle as they all seemed to stir at once, to find emotional relief in some movement, however trifling and insignificant. Peter drew closer to Dr. New's side. Basil Stacey fumbled for a chair and sat down in it heavily. Mrs. Bascom released Sylvia's hand and glanced at her face, rather expecting to find nervous tears of excitement there. But Sylvia sprang to her feet and moved toward Ruel with a smile that ignored every one and everything else. They did not speak, merely joined hands and gazed at each other, so Mrs. Bascom looked away, stepped to the desk, sniffed of the musk-scented gloves, then smiled at Sewell's exultant expression.

The judge's pen scratched its way across the paper in a brief statement of the two murders he had just heard confessed, then he thrust the pen into Dr. New's hand, soberly read aloud the words that he had written, and waited while the guilty man awkwardly signed his name.

An involuntary sigh of relief escaped Sewell's lips, but he tried to conceal it by speaking sharply.

'I'll take care of that paper, Judge. Now, then, Pete, rustle him off to the jail, an' do it kind of sly. I don't want trouble when the village finds out who killed King, an' there might be if they learned it too quick or sudden. Search him careful before you go too. Judge, would you just as soon drive him along in your car? Thanks. An' you, Dr. Smith, better step along with 'em as an extra guard. I guess you understand about most things by now, an' what you don't, I'll be pleased to tell you later.'

Sewell looked about him, as if to make sure every one was accounted for, and saw Basil scowling ferociously at the oblivious Sylvia and Ruel. The inspector chuckled aloud.

'Oh, Miss Hawley, if I could interrupt for a second —— About that will, now. What do you say doin' with it?'

Sylvia turned about slowly, her face animated, her eyes sparkling.

'Just what I said before — and always meant to do if there was no other way — probate it! As soon as that is done, I shall make a lot of bequests and gifts — all, in fact, that are specified in the will he really meant to execute. If you're afraid to trust me, make it binding somehow in writing and I'll sign it.'

'Hump! Guess that ain't necessary — not for the likes of you, Sylvia. An' I calculate it kind of proves drugs ain't hurt you none or warped your brain!'

'But, Sylvia' — Basil jumped to his feet excitedly — 'you don't seem to realize things yet. You need some one to explain ——'

'Yes, I guess I do. Won't you help me and explain things — Ruel?' she smiled, deliberately turning her back on Stacey. Though this movement hid her own face and expression, Ruel's was easy to see — and interpret!

With another explosive chuckle, Sewell again issued a command.

'Stacey, get along in that auto, too. The doctor might as well have a full an' complete bodyguard to his new lodgin's. Besides, you ain't — er — needed here any longer — an' that's permanent!'

Basil took the hint. There was nothing else he could do! After the prisoner's pockets had been emptied into his satchel, the men filed out of the room. But Ruel was oblivious to their departure as he and Sylvia whispered together.

When Sewell had seen the automobile disappear down the road, he swung about on the piazza steps to find Mrs. Bascom at his elbow.

'Congratulations, Ezra.'

'Congratulations, Ellen.'

Their words were spoken in unison and made them both smile. Mrs. Bascom was the first to recover, becoming serious again.

'It's all over, Ezra, and, my, what a relief! Somehow this house seems — natural, like King's home, for the first time in days. It's the old, Smiling House again.'

'What you mean by that, Ellen, some of your fancy business?'

'Yes — nothing. But, Ezra, there's so much I don't understand even now.' Automatically they began to walk away from the house toward the road. 'You learned so much more than I ever suspected. Who was it saw him eavesdropping at the workshop? Which one told you where he sat during the play? None of the women, I'm sure, for their written statements made no mention of it. Yet you said ——'

Sewell stumbled and almost fell headlong. He stopped to pick up an old, rusty horseshoe by the side of the road, stared at it in surprise, then burst into a laugh.

'Gosh, I ain't superstitious, but I kind of wish I'd fallen over that a little while back. It would have made me feel better, sort of given me courage an' good luck when I needed it, Ellen.'

'Ezra Sewell, answer my questions. Who ——'

'Hold on there an' give me a chance. I can do it, I guess, all to once. Just between you an' me, there was lots of them things I *said* that wasn't true. No one saw him so much as I made out they did!'

'What? But you did say ——'

'Yep, I said a lot. Some of it was true, about the oil an' the proof of his searchin' your house an' such, but I figured it might not be enough to make him confess, so, seein' as I was pretty sure just how he did things, I sort of dressed up my story a bit, added some frills an' guesses, like. An' it worked fine, Ellen B.!'

'You mean — a lot of it was bluff?'

'It sure was — an' I was kind of scared at first — till I got goin' good, an' then my tongue wagged all of itself! But if I hadn't been such a slow poke, lettin' myself get all balled up over simple things ——'

'That's not true,' interrupted Mrs. Bascom softly. 'You know it isn't, Ezra. You handled it just right, as events have proved. But about King's partner. How did you know this man killed him too?'

'I didn't — hadn't the least idea. Fact is, I didn't even mean to imply it, only my tongue got waggin' the more scared he looked, an' then he took my words for an accusation himself! I guess that part'll be up to that smart Bartrum or some one to check up. Wonder why he didn't come? Oh, well, I suppose he had somethin' bigger to tend to, perhaps, an' didn't want to bother with country inspectors. I ain't worried he missed the show — not now.'

'The credit fell where it was due, I'd say, if you asked *me*,' retorted Mrs. Bascom seriously.

'Now, Ellen, cut out that flatterin' business or you'll have me blushin',' muttered Sewell, abashed.

At that moment he lived up to his prophecy by flushing a beet red, but not because of her words. They had turned upon reaching the road, retracing their steps past the house toward the barn. As Sewell spoke, they had just reached a point opposite the den, and both involuntarily looked in. Through the open window could be seen the back of a chair with two heads just visible above it, one bobbed, the other carelessly tousled, but so close to each other that duller eyes might have taken them for one head!

'My land, come away from that,' muttered Sewell, seizing Mrs. Bascom by the arm. 'I'll be darned if you ain't brought me here on purpose, like a sentimental — a sentimental —— Well, anyway, this ain't no place for you an' me.'

He was breathing unnecessarily hard and his face grew almost purple. Mrs. Bascom's silent smile was disconcerting.

'That's a woman — all over,' continued Ezra. 'An' the older they get ——'

'Seems to me you remarked I wasn't so very old — not to you,' interrupted Mrs. Bascom slyly.

'You ain't — only — you're old enough to know better.'

Sewell was flustered. This new mood of hers upset him. She had not risen to the bait of any of his taunts of late, and seemed almost a stranger to him with her compliments and flattery. It made him uncomfortable, at a loss to understand her or know what to answer. But he strove manfully to steer the conversation into safer channels.

'I ain't had time to thank you, Ellen, for all you did. Without you I'd have been helpless an' ——'

'Ezra Sewell, I've never told a man to shut up before, but I'm doing it now! If you say another word about my acting like a fool, I declare I'll — I'll cut you dead when we meet again.'

Ezra chuckled with relief. He felt on firmer ground now.

'It certain sure would be a tragedy if that happened, Ellen B. Don't know as I could get along on the plain victuals of life without any of your sass, if you know what I mean!'

She did, and tossed her head, her anger rising in spite of herself.

'Oh, a shrew, am I? Well, if that's what appeals to you, I'll do my best to give full meals of it, Ezra Sewell. Of all the insults I ever received from you, that's the worst. If you can't think of anything better to say ——'

'Maybe I could if I tried hard,' he drawled as she turned to walk away. 'But I'd kind of like to know if what you said is a threat or a promise — that sass with my meals part?'

She whirled about, her eyes snapping, her jaw set. But before she could speak, he repeated his question quizzically, and now that she saw his eyes, she read a different meaning in it.

'Three times a day — at meals — like a prescription. Do you mean it, Ellen? Three meals a day together — you an' me ——'

Her mouth opened in astonishment, closed with a snap, then curved into a smile as she seemed to make a discovery.

'It may be the most fool trick I ever did, Ezra Sewell, but I guess I do!'

Just at that moment, Sylvia and Ruel looked up and saw them. Ruel did not blush as Sewell had done a short time ago. Instead he shamelessly grinned and watched the arm of the law doing its duty — until it suddenly occurred to him to follow the good example set by his elders!

THE END

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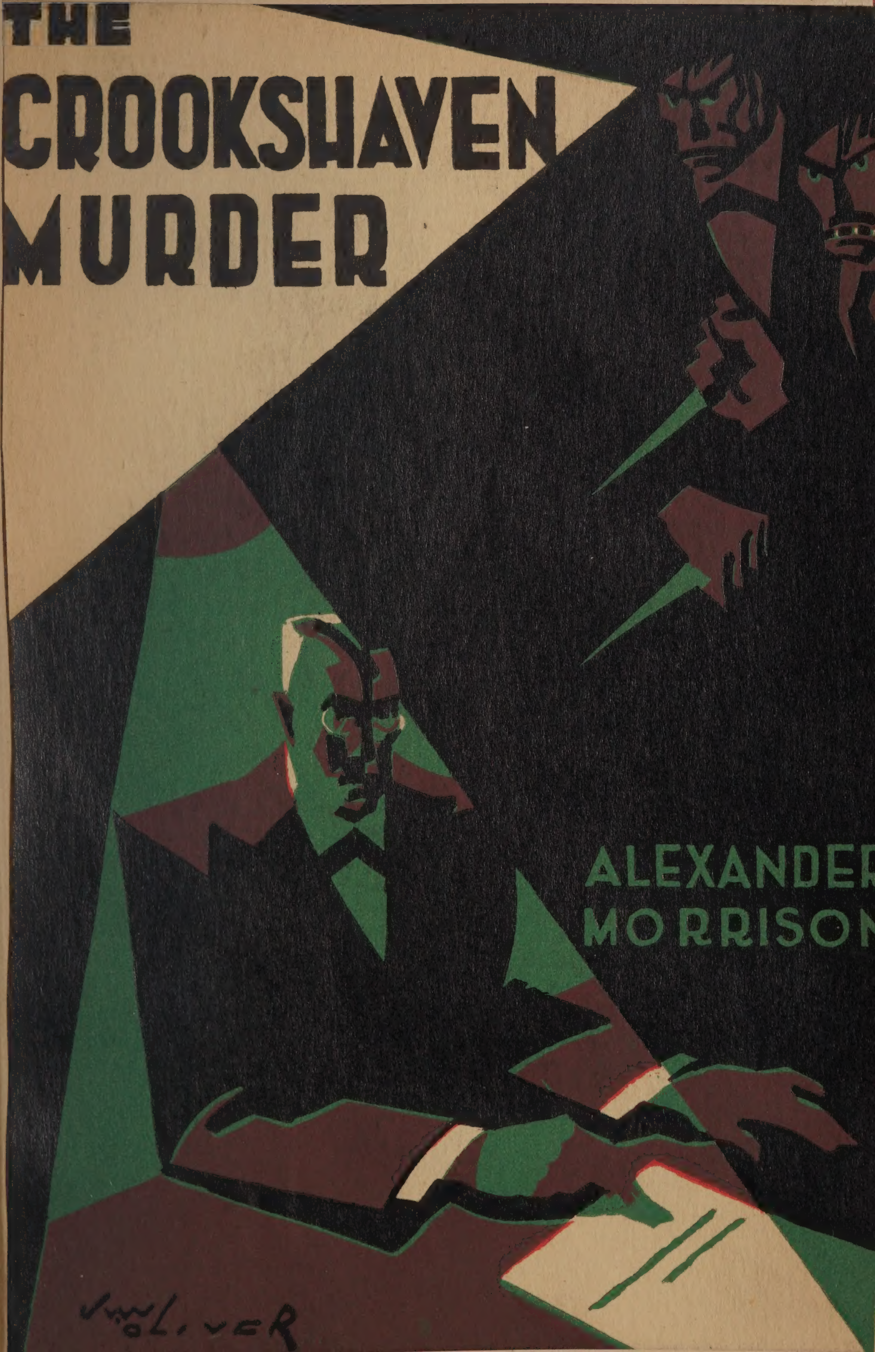

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